

Precognition and Backwards Causation

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This paper argues that whatever mechanism is responsible for precognition, at least one can be ruled out on conceptual grounds. That mechanism is backwards causation. If it is possible that events can have causes occurring later than the time they happen, it would be possible that our perceptions be caused earlier than the events they are perceptions of. This is shown to constitute a successful objection to Beloff's view that there are circumstances imaginable which call for a backwards causation explanation. It is claimed that a backwards-process is nonsensical, in which case backwards-causal candidates cannot be tied to their effects. The concept of cause arises from our interest and ability to tamper with natural events. These points, considered jointly, show that the idea of backwards causation can have no explanatory power. - Keith Seddon

As a philosopher, I am not concerned to establish the validity of purported cases of precognition. That precognition may in fact have occurred is obviously not necessary for the truth, if it be one, that precognition be possible. The idea that empirical evidence *per se* can establish the fact of precognition seems to me to be a mistake, because evidence can count for or against an alleged phenomenon only to the extent that we already have a theory (even a very crude one) by which the evidence can be interpreted. No empirical facts can count for precognition unless we already have a concept of what precognition is and unless we already hold the assumption that precognition be a possible phenomenon. The idea that that assumption itself can be established by empirical evidence just seems wrong to me.

There is one view which supposes that a precognition is a future event causing the subject to previously make a precognition-claim about it. In investigating the conceptual issues involved in the idea of precognition, I claim to have found good reasons for rejecting this view, and I shall show what they are in the course of this paper. Regardless of whatever mechanisms may be put forward to explain the operation of precognition, my view is that there is at least one which fails on logical grounds, and that mechanism is the one which understands future events to (sometimes) cause previous events. This leaves the question open as to whether there are other mechanisms which are logically tenable which can explain

precognition. I shall have nothing to say about that here.

Let us be clear about some helpful jargon. A precognition-claim is the occurrence of some statement which makes explicit reference to, and states some fact about, a future event. Not all statements which do this are precognition-claims, of course. Common-or-garden predictions which we make all the time, such as "The kettle will boil in three minutes", are obviously not precognition-claims. If evidence is readily available to someone in the present which indicates the likelihood that their statement about the future is true, or will be made true, then that statement cannot be entertained as a candidate for a precognition-claim. What distinguishes precognition-claims from other sorts of statement about the future, is that there is no evidence in the present which speaks *for* the truth of such a claim, although there may be evidence which seemingly speaks *against* it. (For instance, someone might make the precognition-claim that A will die from natural causes in six months, whilst the evidence currently available indicates that A is in the best of health.) The other sort of statement that has to be ruled out as inadmissible is the guess: precognition-claims are not guesses or hunches. Not all precognition-claims succeed in describing the future, but in so far as the person who made the claim had the belief that they were saying something about the future, we shall include the claim under this heading, because their belief has the same character as that of the person who

makes a precognition-claim which *does* describe some future event. A precognition-claim which succeeds in describing the future I will call a precognition. This provides for the necessary allowance that not all precognition-claims need be precognitions. This distinction between precognition-claims and precognitions has a precise analogy with statements about the past derived from memory: not all our memory-claims are memories, because sometimes people make statements about the past, relying on their memories, which although they think them true are in fact false.

What makes a precognition-claim true is the fact that it matches (to some acceptable extent) a future event; it is then a precognition. This is not enough to make the precognition-claim knowledge, because on such a criterion guesses and hunches which turn out to be correct would also constitute knowledge, and this obviously should be resisted. The tendency then is to point out that since it is true that we afford to ordinary statements of perception the status of knowledge because those statements are caused by the events they are about, likewise, precognitions constitute knowledge because they too are caused by the events they are about. Whether or not plain precognition-claims (which are not also precognitions) are caused by anything is left an open question.

There are two ways in which a precognition might be supposed to acquire the status of knowledge. One way, already mentioned, is that it is caused by the future event it describes. The other way in which a precognition can claim to be knowledge is parallel to the way in which someone who intends to perform a certain action can be said to have 'intentional knowledge' of that action and that event which they have reason to believe will result from the action. On this view the precognition is not really a precognition at all. It supposes that an agent has an unconscious intention to later influence circumstances such that A later occurs (whatever sort of event that might be). The precognition that A will occur constitutes 'intentional knowledge' that A will occur: between that time and A's happening the agent performs actions that in the circumstances result in A. Thus, for example, an agent could be said to have 'intentional knowledge' that such and such aeroplane will crash, if he has the intention, for instance, to sabotage the plane. If that intention is unconscious, and he does unconsciously sabotage the plane such that the plane crashes, any manifestation of the original intention (perhaps in the form of a dream) would

appear to be a precognition of the future. To use this account to explain many actual cases of alleged precognition, it would also have to be supposed that agents can influence distant objects by means of psycho-kinesis (ie 'psychically' affecting objects, sometimes distant, by merely intending to do so : some researchers claim to have established 'P.K.' as a fact). Whether or not the idea of 'action at a distance' perpetrated by people makes sense, I shall leave for another time.

I aim to show now that whether or not there really is anything which, when added to a precognition-claim matching a future event, turns that claim into a precognition which has the status of knowledge, it cannot be that the precognition-claim be caused by the future event.

John Beloff [1] suggests that the concept of backwards causation might be practically useful, such that in exceptional but perfectly imaginable circumstances, we would feel compelled to say that backwards causation was the best explanation of those circumstances. He cites an example of Dummett's [2]. Here a man discovers by trial and error that if he claps his hands before opening the post he always finds a cheque made out to him, but never gets a cheque on those occasions when he forgets to clap his hands. Beloff wishes to claim that if we were in such a situation, whatever our philosophical inclinations about backwards causation, we would not refrain from clapping our hands. That being so, he thinks that none of us could honestly deny that clapping our hands when we did was a necessary condition "or cause" of the cheque having been put into that particular envelope. The general claim that we can derive from this example is that what happened in the past might not have happened had it not been for some action or event in the present.

One reply is to say that this example does not in the least show what Beloff believes it to show. I, for a start, would not feel compelled to believe that my clapping had anything whatever to do with causing any turn of circumstance in the past. The difficulty comes in finding reasons that support this reply. It is very tempting to say that, at any particular time, no cheque could have been put into its envelope unless all those circumstances necessary and jointly sufficient for that occurrence obtained at that time. To say that unfortunately is to deny just what Beloff wants to assert, which is that a necessary condition for a particular event can occur *after* the event. My reply succeeds only in begging the question.

Here is an approach which I think is more

successful. If we are to entertain the idea that events can have causes occurring later than the time they happen, we have to entertain at one and the same time the idea that the perceptions we are caused to have can occur earlier than the events they are perceptions of. That means the temporal order in which we perceive events is necessarily no guide to the actual temporal order of those events^[3]. There is therefore no point in even attempting to talk about the temporal or causal priority of events. If backwards causation were a possibility, Beloff would have no reason to believe that his clapping his hands was a later necessary (causal) condition for someone's earlier inserting the cheque into the envelope, because under the backwards causation hypothesis he can have no reason for favouring that particular sequence of events with their particular causal relations over any other possible sequence. The assumption of backwards causation implies our being unable to determine with reliability which events are causally or backwards causally connected with which events and which events are causally or backwards causally connected to our perceptions. And that implies the further fact that the temporal sequence of events would be different from the sequence we perceive and necessarily undiscoverable. This shows that the idea of backwards causation cannot be introduced as a mechanism to explain Beloff's cheque-in-the-envelope experiences, and therefore, generally, it cannot be entertained as the mechanism behind any phenomena.

This view can be filled in further by imagining a sequence of two sorts of events:

B A B A B B B A B A A A

The earlier event is on the left, the later on the right. If it helps we may consider the B's to represent the insertions of cheques into envelopes, and the A's to represent Beloff clapping. It seems to me that an awkward question arises. Which A's cause which B's? We *can* pair the A's and B's off, because the example shows six of each. But what reason would we have for saying that the last A caused the first B prior to it rather than any of the others? No reason at all. Perhaps I have cheated by forcing the time separations between A's and B's to be different for each pair no matter which possible pairing of the whole sequence we adopt. Perhaps it should be like this:

B1 A1 B2 A2 B3 A3 B4 A4 B5 A5 B6 A6

This is no good either. Why should we think that A1 causes B1 and A2 causes B2 any more than we think that A2 causes B1 and B4 causes A2?

What is missing here are the processes which extend between the causally connected events. In ordinary forwards causation, if X causes Y but Y occurs some time after X, then some intermediary process has developed in the time between X's finishing and Y's occurring. Future cause A and its past effect B must similarly be mediated by a process which A 'begins' and which 'results' in B. The idea of such a backwards process is beyond conception. If I now perceive event A happening, that is because light rays are reflected off the surfaces of those objects doing whatever they are doing which constitutes A's taking place, such that the light affects what sort of impulses the retinas in my eyes send to my brain. The idea that someone can precognise a future event because light being reflected from objects is going backwards in time to affect the precognisor long before the event's occurring is plainly absurd. But unless we can identify the process involved, if we were to maintain that precognitions are caused by future events, it is not clear why future events should always, or even sometimes, cause precognitions of *themselves* rather than precognition of other events, or hallucinations of goblins for instance, or any other mental or non-mental phenomena.

The most instructive approach to this issue is to think about why we are interested in causes, how we come to have the concept of causation and how we come to learn the use of the term 'cause'. I agree with Mellor, when he says that our "interest in events and in causation stems entirely from wanting to affect the world and to find out what goes on in it" [4]. Mellor's view is that in particular circumstances, causes make their effects more likely to occur than if they hadn't happened. Thus we would not say that the brick's striking the window is the cause of the window breaking if we did not accept that the brick's striking the window, in the circumstances, made the breaking of the window more likely than otherwise. What is also true is that when an agent believes that A causes B, and he wants B, he does A because he thinks that in so doing he will be more likely to get B than if he does something else or nothing. Because of the regularity that obtains in the world regarding what sort of event results in which other sort of event, we are able to discover the full extent of this regularity by deliberately trying out various actions and seeing what we get in consequence, and we are able to

purposely pull causal levers as it were to make circumstances go rather as we wish them to go instead of any other way. I don't see that there can be any dispute about that. Dummett is bearing this in mind when he says:

“ ... to suppose that the occurrence of an event could ever be explained by reference to a subsequent event involves that it might also be reasonable to bring about an event in order that a *past* event should have occurred, an event previous to the action. To attempt to do this would plainly be nonsensical, and hence the idea of explaining an event by reference to a later event is nonsensical in its turn.” [5]

This obviously draws on the same intuitions that led Gale to argue that we cannot intend to bring about something in the past, because we cannot deliberate about performing an action if we already know whether the action will be successful or unsuccessful. Since what has already happened in the past is known, we cannot act intentionally to have made something happen^[6]. Brier, however, is not convinced by this. He says that if as a matter of fact we do not know for sure the future outcome of an action, it makes sense to deliberate about performing it. Since we very rarely (if ever) know the future outcomes of our actions, our deliberation is entirely warranted. Brier applies the logic of acting towards the future to acting towards the past, and says that if as a matter of fact we do not know that Jones was killed (for example) it makes sense for us to deliberate about doing something now to have saved him via backwards causation, and similarly for all other past events which as a matter of fact we are ignorant about [7].

I don't think this makes any sense at all, because whether or not an agent knows the facts about the occurrence of some past event, he cannot believe that by acting in the present he can make it more likely than not that that past event occurred. If the event did happen, there is nothing now that can be done to make it more likely that it happened.

Let me sum up my position on this issue. I argued earlier that if backwards causation were a fact then the world we perceived would not show the features of regularity which I believe it must show for our being able to develop the concept of cause and our being able to manipulate circumstances to our own advantages. The point of introducing the concept of precognition is, I

take it, part of the overall aim of discovering regularities about our experiences, with the view to explaining why we experience what we do at the times we do, as well as predicting what we are likely to experience next. That aim, I have tried to argue, would be undermined if we postulated backwards causation as the mechanism behind precognition (or any other phenomena).

Notes :

1. John Beloff, 'Backward Causation', *The Philosophy of Parapsychology*, New York: Parapsychology Foundation, 1977, pp37-46.
2. M.A.E. Dummett, 'Can An Effect Precede its Cause?', *Aristotelian Society Proceedings*, Supp.27, 1954, pp27-44. Beloff (who mistakenly attributes the example to Bob Brier, *Precognition and the Philosophy of Science*, New York: Humanities Press, 1974 - when Brier is in fact citing Dummett) somewhat alters the example whilst retaining its logical character.
3. cf. D.H. Mellor, *Real Time*, C.U.P. 1981, Chapter 10.
4. *ibid.* p121.
5. M.A.E. Dummett, 'Can an Effect Precede its Cause?' *op.cit.* pp34-5.
6. R.M. Gale, *The Language of Time*, New York: Humanities Press, 1968, Chap. 7.
7. Bob Brier, *Precognition and the Philosophy of Science*, New York: Humanities Press, 1974.

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Keith Seddon relaxing at home.