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BOOK REVIEW

Will do? Causes and volitions

W. J. Mander: The volitional theory of causation: from Berkeley to the twentieth century. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, 294 pp, $95.00 HB

Aaron Wells[1]

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A book on the theory that all causality is based in volition is commendably unfashionable at a time when science is widely thought to rule out conscious decisions entirely. W. J. Mander surveys more than forty figures, many of them obscure, who either defend or criticize the volitional theory. The focus is on Anglophone philosophy, especially in the nineteenth century, with Maine de Biran in a key supporting role. With writers in German—Schopenhauer, Lotze, and Nietzsche—Mander is notably hesitant to commit to an interpretation. We learn that in the English-speaking context, the volitional theory was widespread and the focus of lively debate. It was developed in three main ways: (1) a theistic or pantheistic version, where all causation not stemming from human willing derives from the volitions of God or a world-soul—most natural things are not causes; (2) a panpsychist version, such that causation and willing are both present throughout nature; and (3) a weaker variant, which suggests a mere analogy between human volition and causation in general.

Mander contends, convincingly, that historians of philosophy have neglected volitional theories. His carefully researched reconstruction of a centuries-long debate fills a gap in the literature. Because volition is a central concept, the book covers not only the metaphysics and epistemology of causation but also topics typically associated with action theory, ethics, or moral psychology.

The book is also a defense of the volitional theory, taken in a robust and not just analogical sense. Mander adds that an idealist metaphysics, along Berkeleyan lines, is congenial to the volitional theory. He therefore thinks the strength of the volitional theory gives an indirect argument for idealism. Setting aside his interpretations of specific texts, I will argue that his attempt to rehabilitate the volitional theory is vitiated by an unclarity and by the failure to defend two key assumptions.

First, the unclarity. For Mander, a paradigmatic voluntary action is a bodily motion, such as wiggling your big toe. As Hume pointed out early on, this does not

✉ Aaron Wells
aaron.m.wells@gmail.com

[1] Paderborn University, Paderborn, Germany

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seem to be a case of direct causation. Instead, the evidence suggests some causal chain that runs through nerves and muscles and ends with the toe's wiggle. So it is not clear what is meant by the claim that wiggling a toe is a voluntary action. This claim might refer to the whole causal chain, or to just one link in it: a volition or act of willing. Now, strict volitional theorists hold that all causation is volitional. They therefore have only two ways of handling bodily motion. They must either say that a volition directly causes the toe to wiggle, and deny that there is a causal chain here, or else say that every link in the causal chain is an independent act of willing, including nerve firings and contractions of muscles. Mander's response to Hume, however, makes neither of these moves. Rather, he grants that volition is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the toe's wiggling (60; 107; 241–42). Even this seems to require an argument, though, since the toe might move involuntarily. But the bigger problem is that he has allowed the necessary conditions for a paradigmatic voluntary action to include causes that are not volitional, such as nerve firings and muscle contractions. He thereby abandons a general volitional theory of causation.

At this point, Mander might retrench to voluntary mental actions that do not result in bodily motions, for he thinks that here, both cause and effect are given through first-person experience. A volitional theory based on these cases holds only for mental causes and effects. Even in pursuit of this more modest theory—which looks most congenial to dualism, not idealism—Mander makes a strong assumption. Inspired by Berkeley and Maine de Biran, he holds that we have direct, infallible knowledge of what goes on in our minds: there is no gap between an apparent mental cause and a real mental cause (267–70). Already in the early modern period, assumptions like these needed defense. Leibniz, for example, holds that we have unconscious perceptions. Mere introspection may not reveal what causes what in the mind. This does not, however, prevent Leibniz from holding that feelings can afford an awareness of our own causal activity (e.g., Leibniz 1999, 2019). As Mander notes in a probing discussion, even Reid—the champion of common-sense philosophy—takes some mental causes as known not by introspection, but by inference (78). And for Kant, introspection reveals only inner appearances, not the self as it is in itself. Nietzsche, with his diagnoses of inner life's illusions, raises even more radical doubts. Though Mander mentions the Nietzschean critique (220), this does not shake his confidence in our "common and familiar first-person experience" (263).

Another important assumption that goes undefended—aside from references to arguments in Hume and Kant—is the impossibility of directly perceiving causation in outer objects. The assumption is significant because, on volitional theories, we can only grasp causation by considering our own volitions. If we could perceive directly that, for example, the cat knocked over the glass, then the key reason to adopt a volitional theory would vanish. Mander attributes this assumption to many volitional theorists, including Berkeley (25), Reid (76), Kames (93), Maine de Biran (100), Thomas Brown (127), Francis Bowen (155), Henry Mansel (160), and James Martineau (167). By contrast, the medieval Aristotelian tradition held that the senses directly present us with causation. The occasionalist Malebranche agreed, while denying that, in this case, perceptual representations are true (Chamberlain 2021). The idea that we straightforwardly perceive causation has also been revived more recently—arguably by Mary Shepherd in the nineteenth century, and definitely by

Anscombe in the twentieth. But Mander never explores in detail how volitional theorists might respond to it.

This leads to a major problem. Hume and Hamilton, as Mander discusses, objected to the volitional theory as it also requires perception of causation, and is therefore subject to the same objections as the traditional Aristotelian theory. Any viable volitional theory, Mander concludes, must hold that causal necessity can be perceived (143). But that is just to grant the plausibility of the traditional Aristotelian picture, and so to undermine the main motivation for the volitional theory.

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