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Causing Things and Doing Things

One of Hart and Honoré's central concerns in *Causation in the Law* is with the question how it is we single out 'the cause' of some event or circumstance from the large range of conditions which is always requisite for the occurrence or obtaining of any effect.¹ In this paper, I want to discuss not their answer to this question, but rather a distinction on which they appear to draw, almost *en passant*, in the course of answering it – a distinction which has only rarely made much of an appearance in more recent philosophy of action. The distinction I have in mind is the distinction between what I shall *call simple doings*, on the one hand, and *causings*, on the other. Hart and Honoré seem to operate on the assumption that though there is causality to be discerned in the ontological structures underlying many instances of human agency, there is a class of basic action-types – the simple doings, as I call them – in our understanding of which the notion of causality really does not figure at all. Speaking of how we go about assigning a given factor as 'the cause' of any particular harm, Hart and Honoré write as follows (I quote at length so that the main idea will be clear):

It is plain that, both in raising questions of this kind and in answering them, ordinary thought is powerfully influenced by the analogy between the straightforward cases of causal attribution (where the elements required for the production of harm in addition to the initiating action are all 'normal' conditions) and even simpler cases of responsibility which we do not ordinarily describe in causal language at all but by the simple transitive verbs of action. These are the cases of the direct manipulation of objects involving changes in them or their position: cases where we say 'He pushed it', 'He broke it', 'He bent it'. The cases which we do confidently describe in causal language ('The fire was caused by his carelessness', 'He caused a fire') are cases where no other human action or abnormal occurrence is required for the production of the effect, but only normal conditions. Such cases appear as mere long-range or less direct versions or extensions of the most obvious and fundamental case of all for the attribution of responsibility: the case where we simply say 'He did it'. Conversely in attaching importance to thus causing harm as a distinct ground of responsibility and in taking certain kinds of factor (whether human interventions or abnormal occurrences), without which the initiating action would not have led to harm, to preclude the description of the case in simple causal terms, common sense is affected by the fact that here, because of the manner in which the harm eventuates, the outcome cannot be represented as a mere extension of the initiating action; the analogy with the fundamental case for responsibility ('He did it') has broken down. (1985, p. 73).

What is striking about the view here expressed, I think, in the context of more recent philosophy of action, is the idea that the cases of direct manipulation might potentially form a basic class of cases, analytically distinct from those in which we use explicitly causal language, and on the basis of analogy with which we think about other sorts of case where we are not in direct physical contact with the objects to which harm is caused. For the thought that *all* acting is causing – even where we do not *speak* explicitly of causing – is now very common, perhaps sufficiently common,

¹ In particular, of course, because their concern is with legal matters, they are often concerned with the case in which the effect is *harm* or *damage* of some kind – so that their question becomes, more specifically, how we are to single out from the many conditions requisite for the production of some particular harm or damage, the particular event, action, omission, or whatever it may be, which is to be regarded, in this instance, as 'the' cause of that harm.

even, to be orthodoxy. Hart and Honoré's examples of 'the direct manipulation of objects', for instance, would, I think, receive a basically causal treatment at the hands of many contemporary philosophers of action. In the case of 'He broke it' and 'He bent it', indeed, it might be alleged that the verbs involved even invite a causal *analysis* – that in their transitive uses, 'break' perhaps means 'cause to break' and 'bend' means 'cause to bend' (where 'break' and 'bend' are of course understood *intransitively* as they occur in these purported analyses).² 'He pushed it' admittedly needs a different treatment: 'push' certainly does not mean 'cause to push'. But even here it might be wondered whether causation somehow enters the picture – successful pushing, at any rate, usually implies the movement of an object – which may then be said to have been caused to move by the agent who pushes; and even unsuccessful pushing involves at least (it might be said) the movement of such things as muscles and tendons – which again can then be said to have been caused to move. And even when one's action involves no non-bodily object of manipulation at all, as when, for instance, one raises one's arm to stretch – well, there is still the arm, one might think, which one has caused to rise. But if this is right, one might think that Hart and Honoré are wrong to speak merely of the operation of *analogy* to these central cases of direct manipulation in our thought about more 'indirect' cases. Rather, it might be alleged, the cases are fundamentally *identical* in causal structure. Indeed, *whenever* I act, it might be said, I cause things to happen – and those happenings may be more or less proximate in time and space to the action itself – but there is no simple 'he did it' which does not reduce somehow to 'he caused it'. Doing things is always causing things.

It is not in fact entirely obvious that Hart and Honoré might not themselves endorse this position, consistently with what they explicitly say in the passage quoted. For they restrict themselves to talking about how we would be inclined to *describe* certain different sorts of case – and there is nothing wrong with agreeing that causality does in fact figure in some important and distinctive way in all cases of action, while pointing out that we rarely use explicitly causal language in certain sorts of case. I *suspect*, however, that because of their general commitment to the guidance provided to metaphysics by ordinary language, they would probably have been disinclined to discern causation in cases where it might seem to be unnatural to speak of it. And one can in any case imagine another possible motivation for a reluctance to suppose that causality figures in the basic cases, given the views that Hart and Honoré appear to hold about causation in general. The explicit source of the basic framework for thinking about causation from which they begin is Mill's (1886) account – and although demurring in important ways from several aspects of Mill's view of causation, they remain wedded to what I shall call his *generalism* about causality: the view that causal principles of a general nature must always be exemplified by individual instances of causation (1985, p.49). Hart and Honoré are at pains to stress that these generalisations need not be strict and exceptionless – they note that frequently, what is involved is a rough and ready kind of generalisation to which many exceptions can generally be imagined. But it remains their view that a certain conformity to general causal principles is essential to any individual interaction which can be regarded as causal. And this dictates in turn that their ontology of causation remains event-based (in a broad sense) – their understanding of what it is for a relationship to be causal is based on the idea of subsumption under a principle that has been generally found to hold, and subsumption requires related entities bearing relationships to one another of the right sort to be subsumed under such general principles. Hart and Honoré are sensitive, it is true, to the need especially when considering legal examples, to incorporate such things as persistent states, failures and omissions into the

² See Hornsby (1980) Ch. 1 for an extensive discussion of the class of verbs, into which 'bend' and 'break' both fall, which support the inference from $aV_T b$ to bV_I (where a denotes a subject, b an object, V_T a transitive occurrence and V_I an intransitive occurrence of the verb).

account of the entities which may be related to one another by the relation of cause and effect, so it is not a narrow notion of 'event' which is in question.³ But the account remains essentially subsumption-based – and therefore one thing that definitely does *not* receive any consideration by Hart and Honoré is the possibility that there might be such a thing as *agent* causation – a relation holding between an agent on the one hand, and an event, state, failure or omission on the other, such that the first may be said to cause or produce the second. Agent causation is rather difficult to square, in a simple way, with generalism – it appears to make no sense to say that agent A and event E (for instance) can be described in ways which render them subsumable under some general principle or law. But in some ways, I should like to suggest in this paper, the idea that we should recognise agent-causal, as well as event-causal, relations fits very naturally with many of Hart and Honoré's views. Moreover, it provides, I think, the means to maintain a quite general causalism in one's metaphysics of action, without falling foul of the various objections to causalism which have been rehearsed in the literature – and some of which perhaps underlie Hart and Honoré's commitment to the existence of a class of simple doings, not amenable to any causal analysis.

I propose to begin my discussion by looking at various different challenges that have been made to the idea that acting is always causing, in order to extract from those challenges some lines of thought that might make it seem as though there must be at least some simple, non-causal doings, in the sense suggested by Hart and Honoré. Since Hart and Honoré do not offer any arguments for their view, I shall go elsewhere to look for these lines of reasoning. The first challenge to causalism about action arises from a natural worry about what the causalist could possibly say about the case of unsuccessful trying. The second is taken from a recent article by Jennifer Hornsby, and focuses on what we would have to say about the spatiotemporal location of actions, on the assumption that they are to be regarded as the causes of certain bodily movements. The final argument comes from Ginet's book, *On Action* and is based on the idea that a causal account cannot, at any rate, be applied to *mental* actions – and hence that causality cannot be an essential component of any entirely general account of what it is to act. I shall conclude that none of these lines of thought gives us a good reason to reject a fundamentally causal account of the nature of action; but that they do reveal that there are good reasons to be anxious about a specifically *event-causal* model of how the causality involved ought to be represented. Rather, I shall suggest, we need an account which allows *agents* to cause things, and, moreover, to do so via actions which are thought of as the *causings*, rather than the *causes*, of their results. I shall then return to defend this view what I shall call the objection from *generalism* – the worry that causal relationships must be subsumable under some variety of general principle or law, and that the idea that agents are causes is not compatible with this doctrine. This would seem to be the most natural objection to agent causation which arises out of the causal views held by Hart and Honoré; but I shall end by suggesting that the overall coherence of their view would be improved if they were to jettison the generalist aspect of their account which prompts it.

(i) *The Case of Unsuccessful Trying*

If actions are causings, as the causalist suggests, what are we to say of those cases in which we appear to fail to produce any result? Suppose, for example, that having had a spinal anaesthetic, I try to raise my right leg but find myself unable to do so. In that case, I have not caused the result I tried to produce – an elevation of my right leg. But it might be thought that an action of some sort has still occurred because one might think that, as Ginet puts it, "to try to act is to act" (1990: 10). So is this case a counterexample to the thesis that all action is causing? My own view is that it is not, and that

³ (1985), p.16.

Ginet himself tells us what we ought to say about it: “If I try to exert force with my arm, then, even if I fail thereby to exert any force (because of a breakdown in my motor neural system), I nevertheless *do* something in a sense in which merely intending to act is not yet to do anything: I have gone beyond planning to *execution*: I have wilfully made a change” (1990: 11). But what is it to *make* a change if it is not to produce one? And production is surely a causal notion.

One might persist in asking, though, what this change is which Ginet insists we must produce in trying. Perhaps neural changes are likely to have occurred in consequence of one’s trying – but it might be claimed that even if this were so, this would not suffice to vindicate the causal theorist. What we are interested in discussing is not merely whether actions are (*de facto*, as it were) all causings of some variety or another, but rather the idea that we might offer something like a *conceptual analysis* of the idea of acting in terms of the concept of causation. Paul Snowdon makes a parallel point in characterising the causal theory of vision – it is an essential part of what it is to believe in the causal theory of vision, he suggests, to endorse something he calls ‘the conceptual thesis’, which states that the claim that it is necessarily true that if a subject S sees a public object, O, then O causally affects S (by producing in S a state reportable in a sentence beginning ‘It looks to S as if ...’) is itself a conceptual truth. Snowdon comments further, as follows:

It is of course very hard to say precisely what the conceptual thesis is claiming, but it seems reasonable to suggest that part of what is involved in a truth’s being a conceptual one is that it is supportable (but not necessarily only supportable) in a distinctive way. And at least part of what is distinctive about the way is that there is a restriction on the data to which appeal can be made in the supporting argument. A somewhat rough way of specifying the restriction is that the data must be relatively immediately acknowledgeable by any person, whatever their education, who can count as having the concept in question” (Snowdon, 1980-1: 176).

And the worry now is, of course, that it might be said in a case such as that of the spinal anaesthetic, described above, that even if it is true that the agent has made some sort of change in trying, and failing, to raise her right leg, the change produced is not something the agent necessarily knows about. Perhaps it may be a change in some region of the brain, for instance, which, owing to the anaesthetic, does not have its normal effect on the motor neurons. But it is perfectly possible for someone not to know that they *have* neurons, or even a brain – while still possessing the concept of an action. So even if it may perhaps be that all action involves an agent’s causing something, it might perhaps be doubted whether this could be part of the very *concept* of an action, a connection we can appreciate merely in coming to understand what it is to intervene actively in the world. How can we hang on to the view that acting is *conceptually required* to be causing, if there are cases in which, though we act, we are unaware that we have caused anything?

The best response to this question for a causal theorist, I think, is to argue that although causation is part of the concept of acting, it is not possible to derive the conclusion that unsuccessful tryings are causings from this conceptual thesis, *without the aid of the additional premise that unsuccessful tryings are actions* – and that the claim that unsuccessful tryings are actions is *not* supportable in a distinctively conceptual way – as is indeed suggested by the fact that it has been quite widely disputed.⁴ Though I am in agreement with Ginet that there are indeed persuasive arguments for supposing that (mere) tryings ought to be accounted actions, they draw, so it seems to me, on premises which are known only by broadly empirical means – so that there is no purely *a priori* route to the conclusion that these tryings are causings. One kind of reason for thinking that unsuccessful trying deserves to be thought of as a variety of action draws on the nature of our

⁴ See e.g., Hornsby (1980: 42) for a prominent denial.

experience of trying – unsuccessful trying may seem subjectively to be in many respects like successful action (for example, if one’s eyes are closed when one attempts to raise one’s leg under spinal anaesthetic, one may be shocked, upon opening them, to find that one’s leg has not in fact risen) – and this makes it seem extremely plausible that trying should be thought of as a sub-type of the more generic category which simply fails to have obvious external manifestations. Another kind of argument (which might perhaps be used in combination with the first) draws on what we know of the physiology of action and the involvement of such things as motor neurons in its production, making it plausible to suppose that the prevention via e.g. spinal block of muscular effects involves disruption only to the later part of a causal process – and that the earlier part likely takes place entirely unimpeded. But it seems the earlier as well as the later part might be regarded as a process which is brought about by the agent, and which hence is active, though its results are entirely internal to the body. Both of these arguments, however, draw on experiential data (in the first case, first-personal, phenomenological experience, and in the second, empirical physiological science). I am very doubtful that one could argue by purely conceptual means that unsuccessful trying is acting.⁵ If one cannot do so, however, then it is no objection to its being a conceptual truth that to act is to cause something, to point out that the effects of the actions which are unsuccessful tryings may be unknown to the agent. It is no objection because we are able to explain the failure of the agent to *know* that her unsuccessful trying involves any causing, by invoking her failure to realise that her unsuccessful trying is an action. And part of what it is to come to understand that it might indeed be regarded as such, one might argue, is precisely to come to understand that there are reasons for regarding an unsuccessful trying as a causing of something nevertheless.

I turn next to the suggestion that a causal view of action involves a problematic account of their spatiotemporal location.

(ii) *Hornsby and the one-event view*

In her (2012), Hornsby notes the pressure that exists to say, when an agent raises her arm and her arm goes up, that we have here not two separate events, but one:

“It is very natural to identify someone’s raising her arm with her arm’s going up. When one sees what goes on when someone raises her arm, one cannot perceptually discriminate between her changing the position of her arm and her arm changing. Moreover, if her raising of her arm did cause her arm’s going up, then presumably it would be temporally prior to her arm’s going up, and thus should be conceived as something which happens inside her from which her arm’s going up ensues ... the conclusion is problematic, however, because it apparently renders actions invisible” (2012: 234).

But if the raising of someone’s arm is just identical with that arm’s rising, then the former presumably cannot be a cause of the latter. If the raising action is the agent’s causing of anything, then, we will have to find another candidate – and it is not at all obvious what that candidate could be. It is imperative, therefore, for anyone wishing to maintain the view that actions are causings by agents to meet the arguments which Hornsby suggests might suggest we should embrace what I shall call for convenience, the ‘identity view’.

⁵ It has been suggested to me by Chris Pulman that the fact that tryings can be intentional, deliberate, voluntary, done for reasons, etc. might count conceptually in favour of the view that they are actions. But the same can be said of omissions and failures – and in those cases, it seems to me there are overwhelming reasons not to make the inference. The class of things to which these sorts of descriptions can be applied is much larger than the class of actions.

Hornsby seems here to offer two distinct possible arguments for the identity view. The first relies on the impossibility of perceptually discriminating between the raising and the rising – they might seem both to take place in the same space and at the same time, and this might seem to be an argument for their identification. The second is an argument against the alternative view that the raising is distinct from the rising and causes it – such a view, Hornsby suggests, might be vulnerable to the worry that in that case, the raising would have to be identified with some event or events taking place inside the body and would thereby be rendered invisible. Does either of these arguments tell against the view that actions are the causings of results by agents?

The first argument is unlikely to seem persuasive to anyone who is already convinced of the necessity, in certain cases, of regarding as distinct items which nevertheless cannot be perceptually discriminated, such as a statue and the lump of clay from which it is composed, for instance. Arguments from Leibniz's Law are likely to be offered against the identification, just as they are offered in the statue/lump case – it will be said, for instance, that while the agent's raising of her arm is an action, the rising is not; that the raising might be eager but the rising could not be, etc. The existence of such views, even without further defence, shows at least that there is plenty of dialectical space for the causal theorist to occupy here.⁶ She will need to be a pluralist rather than a monist with respect to questions about spatiotemporally coinciding objects – but pluralism is a well-worked out and respectable position, backed by what I have elsewhere called a certain *philosophy of individuation*⁷, which allocates a certain distinctive role to the *sortal concept* in carving up the world of thinkable objects. What the pluralist will say about the case at hand is that just as 'statue' and 'lump of clay' are sortals that single out different types of entity, with different persistence conditions, so 'my raising of my arm' and 'the rising of my arm' single out different kinds of events, events which are differentially related to the agent whose arm is raised, and which therefore accept somewhat different predicates. Spatiotemporal coincidence, even if we allow it (and of course we need not – one might allege that the raising has parts that the rising does not)⁸ provides no conclusive arguments for identification.

What of Hornsby's worry that if the raising is the cause of the rising, then actions will turn out to be strictly internal events, not visible to the outside observer? Hornsby has an explicit argument in her (1980) for the worrisome conclusion. In my (2000), I reconstructed this (long since repudiated) argument as follows:

- (i) For an important class of verbs (of which 'move' is one), the following condition holds true: where "*a*" designates something in the category of continuant, it is a necessary condition of the truth of "*a* ϕ -s *b*" that *a* cause *b* to ϕ _i (where ϕ _T and ϕ _i designate transitive and intransitive occurrences of the verb, respectively).
So ("in that case"):
- (ii) Movements_T are events that cause bodily movements,
But
- (iii) Whatever events they are that cause the body to move_i, they presumably occur inside the body.
So
- (iv) Movements_T occur inside the body.
But

⁶ For further discussion, see my (2013).

⁷ See Steward (2013: 695)

⁸ Though I do not myself want to endorse the view that raising and rising are distinct on the grounds that they have different *parts*. The difference between a raising and a rising, on my view, is not merely that the raising is a somewhat longer event which includes the rising as its final portion. I believe that raisings are more categorically distinct from risings than that – as will become apparent below.

- (v) (Some) actions are movements_T.
So
(vi) (Some) actions occur inside the body.

But the inference from (i) through to (iii) can be questioned. In my (2000), I argued against the inference specifically from (i) to (ii); I now think it is better to say rather that *if* (ii) is allowed to follow from (i), that is so only on an understanding of it which makes the further move to (iii) inadmissible. Let me explain.

Hornsby is explicit about how the reasoning which generates (ii) is supposed to go only in an appendix. Individual events first enter the picture by means of Davidson's proposal that we ought to regard some verb predicates as introducing places for events – thus, for example, switching for convenience to Hornsby's own example, we are entitled to say that if Rupert woke_T Rachel up, then a waking_T up of Rachel by Rupert occurred. And similarly, if Rachel woke up, as a result, then we can infer that there was a waking_I up of Rachel. Thus far, then, we have been told that we may represent these two sentences as follows:

- | | |
|--|---|
| (1) Rupert woke _T Rachel up | ($\exists e$) (Woke up (Rupert, Rachel, e)) |
| (2) Rachel woke _I up | ($\exists e$) (Woke up (Rachel, e)) |

Hornsby then comments as follows:

The slots for events revealed here permit a very old suggestion to be cast in a new form. It has been said that "wake up Rachel" means "cause Rachel to wake up". But now one can say that Rupert's waking Rachel *is* his causing her to wake up; or again, with an eye to the representations, that an event that makes (1) true causes an event that makes (2) true. So (1) can be replaced by:
(1*) ($\exists e$)($\exists f$) (Action (Rupert, e) & Cause (e, f) & Wake up (Rachel, f)) (Hornsby 1980: 126).

In this paragraph, we find an argument for the view that actions (such as the wakings_T up of one person by another) are events which cause their results (such as the wakings_I up of woken persons). But there is a potential slide here between what is said on the left-hand side of the semicolon in the second sentence, and what is said on the right-hand side. I am in agreement with Hornsby that it is safe to say that Rupert's waking Rachel is his causing her to wake up (as is perfectly consonant with the agent-causationist view that actions are the causings of results by agents). But this need not yet be to say that an event that makes (1) true causes an event that makes (2) true. This only follows if someone's *causing* of an event can be said also to be an *event which causes* that (second) event. But can it?

Perhaps it can. It might indeed be thought that the inference to 'x is a causing of y' to 'x is a cause of y' is trivial – that causings *of course* cause the events of which they are the causings. But *if* we allow that, then I think we have reason to deny Hornsby's (iii). If all causings by substances of events are to be regarded, in turn, as event-causes of those events, we will have reason to take a different view of the right answer to the question *where* those event-causes occur. We do not need to think about cases specifically of human action to see that the inference might fail. Take, for example, the printing of a document by my printer. There are, no doubt, events taking place internal to the printer – the movement of its carriage, the transfer of ink to the paper, etc. – which can be regarded as some of the causes of the event which is the final document's emerging. But there is no reason, or so I want to insist, to regard these, or any sum of these, as identical with *the printing of the document by the printer*. The printing of the document is by the whole printer, not by any of its

parts – and is very plausibly regarded as something which can be *seen* by a casual observer, looking in the direction of the printer as the paper comes out. But this is not true of the internal events which make the printer's printing of the document possible. If one asks where the printing took place, I should be inclined to say one can give no answer more exact or more accurate than that its location was where the printer is. If we permit causings by substances of certain results to count as amongst the event-causes of such results, therefore, that can only be on an understanding of what it is to be the event-cause of a result which blocks assent to Hornsby's (iii). At least *some* of the events which cause the body to move, we will now want to say, occur simply where the agent is – and not inside her. Of course, it is an interesting and difficult question how the internal events relate to the agent-sized ones. But identification is not the only option.

Hornsby herself once argued that actions are not available from what she called the "impersonal point of view".⁹ It is not accurate, according to Hornsby, to conceive of an action as "a link in a causal chain that could be viewed without paying any attention to people, the links being understood by reference to the world's causal workings" (Hornsby: 161). The implication is that we are able to think of actions only by thinking first of their agents – the persons (or other substances, perhaps) that bring them about – that is how we locate them in the world – and they cannot be located by other means. They are essentially *dependent* entities – dependent for their very thinkability on the prior singling out of the agents who undertake them. And because of this, we should not think of them as occupying the same spatiotemporal position as the smaller events on whose occurrence they depend. They are causings by agents – and hence are located (merely) where the agent is – even if we can more precisely locate the causings by *other* things – carriage, cartridge, ink – without which they cannot happen.

(iii) *Ginet and the Challenge from Mental Action*

In his (1990), Ginet asks the following question:

"If «S's V-ing at t» uniquely designates a particular event, then it designates an action if and only if ... what?"¹⁰

and considers in some detail (only to reject eventually) the answer that it designates an action if and only if it was *S's causing something*. Ginet's attempt to refute the causal analysis focuses largely on the counterexamples that Ginet takes to be provided by the case of mental action. Ginet asks the reader to consider an act of 'mentally saying something', for example, mentally saying the French word *peu*, and comments as follows:

"Such a mental act, it seems plain, does not contain within itself two distinct, causally related events, and so it does not have the structure of one event causing another, the structure that is required by the event-causation analysis of a person's causing something. I mean that it is not *conceptually required* to have such a structure, under our concept of it as that kind of mental act; I do not mean to pronounce upon the causal structure of any neural process to which it may turn out to be identical. To see what I mean, contrast mentally saying something with a mental act that does, in its conception, have a causally complex structure – for example, my causing myself to recall someone's name by forming a mental image of him; such an act consists of two distinct, causally related mental occurrences: my forming the image, and then the name's occurring to me. But mentally saying *peu* is

⁹ Hornsby (1993: 161).

¹⁰ (1990: 2).

obviously not like that; it is not a sequence of two mental events, the first causing the second.” (1990: 12).

What are we to make of this claim? Well, to begin with, we should concede that it is obviously *true* that there is an important contrast in causal structure between a case in which one simply mentally says the French word ‘peu’ to oneself, and one in which one causes oneself to recall someone’s name by forming a mental image of him. In the second case, one does one thing *by* doing another – one recalls someone’s name by (first) forming an image of him – whereas in the first, one simply *speaks* (mentally), not by doing anything else.¹¹ But this, by itself, is not enough to show that there is no ‘structure of one event causing another’ implicit in the first sort of case. One can see this easily by reflecting on the fact that Ginet believes that there *is* such a structure (of one event causing another) in the case of basic voluntary bodily action – the case of raising one’s arm, say. And yet we could contrast a simple case in which one (just) raises one’s arm with a case in which one causes one’s arm to rise by placing it in a sling (say) and then pulling (with the other arm) on a pulley. In the second case, we have what might similarly be said to be a sequence of two events, the first causing the second – one pulls (with one hand) on a pulley and one’s arm rises (as a result)¹². Nothing like this, someone might say (and presumably, Hart and Honoré would say), though, is present in a case in which one simply, voluntarily, raises one’s arm. There might seem to be no ‘structure of one event causing another’ implicit in the latter. And yet, Ginet believes such a structure **is** nevertheless implicit. In considering the case of ‘S’s voluntary exertion of force forward with her arm’, for example (an action one might undertake in order to push open a door), Ginet argues that here we *do* have causal structure. Underlying the appearance of simplicity, he suggests, we can in fact discern causation in the shape of an event which Ginet labels a ‘volition’ causing the arm’s exertion of force forward.

What is Ginet’s argument for thinking that there **is** event-causal structure to be discerned in the case of simple, voluntary exertion of the body? The main consideration which seems pertinent specifically to the contrast with mental action is the claim that here, in the case of voluntary exertion, “there is a clear candidate ... for the role of the result ... namely, the arm’s exerting force” (1990: 24). There is a contrast here, according to Ginet, with the case of mentally saying ‘peu’, in which a similar analysis into an actional event and its result is allegedly not possible, since no appropriate result can be detected. In support of this claim that there is no suitable event to serve as result, Ginet claims that mentally saying ‘peu’ “does not involve a willing of speech exertions and a resulting auditory experience, or any “fainter” or imagined counterpart of such a sequence of experiences” (1990: 12). But I confess that I find this insistence less than compelling. It seems true that merely mentally saying a word does not involve a willing of speech exertions (or, if it does, it must involve also their rapid inhibition, since no actual speech results) – but it does not follow from that that it doesn’t involve a willing *at all*. Might it not, for example, involve a willing that something be imaginatively produced? And why mightn’t the result, contra Ginet, be precisely a type of imaginative experience – the familiar kind of experience involved in auditory imaging, where it is almost as if one hears a sound?

It may be unwise, however, to rest too much weight on the question how best to describe this particular example. I suspect that Ginet is moved to endorse the particular account of mental

¹¹ Or at any rate, if there is a sense in which one is permitted to say that one speaks mentally by e.g. producing a certain kind of neural event, this is not the same sort of ‘by’ relation as exists in cases where one does one thing with the *intention* of doing that thing as a means to do something else.

¹² Although even here, the extent to which we really do have *event* causation might be questioned – it seems more accurate to say that there are two causally related *processes* – as one’s arm pulls on the pulley, one’s other arm rises (virtually simultaneously).

action he does not only by what he finds it intuitively compelling to say about this individual case, but also by certain more general concerns that arise in the context of the sort of volitionism he favours - and in particular, by the worry that surely there must at some point be an end to the discernment of causal structure in action. I open the door (by pushing, say) – that involves a voluntary exertion of force forward causing the door to open. I voluntarily exert force forward – that involves (on Ginet’s view) a volition causing my arm to exert force forward. The volition consists in my willing my arm to exert force forward – surely it is now best to avoid saying that this volition also constitutively involves the production of some result, on pain of infinite regress?¹³ There must, then (one might think) be simple mental actions, pure willings or tryings, which do not themselves consist of one thing’s causing another. But the worry about infinite regress is a product (as Ginet himself explicitly recognises) not of a causal view of action, in and of itself, but rather of an *event-causal* way of thinking about what the discernment of causality must involve. It is absolutely true that the process of dividing every actional occurrence into two parts – one of which is itself an action, and the other its result – cannot go on forever. But suppose one thought agent-causally instead. Might this not enable one to dispose of the worry about infinite regress? After all, the thesis Ginet asks us to consider is the thesis that every action is *S’s causing something* (where S is the agent of the action). Here, it would seem, on the face of it, to be S who is doing the causing, not any event, state or circumstance. Perhaps, then, we should consider whether a view which takes this locution more seriously at face value might aid the causal theorist?

Ginet in fact considers the possibility that someone wishing “to cling to the thesis that acting is causing something” might “venture the suggestion that simple mental acts are cases where we must bring in the notion of agent causation, the notion of a causal relation whose relatum on the cause side is not any event but just the agent as such” (1990: 12). He dismisses the possibility, however, because he insists that for the agent causal account to apply, we still have to find an event to be the *result* and in the case of mentally saying the word ‘peu’, as we have seen, he believes there is no such event. I have questioned, however, whether we should accept Ginet’s claim that an event of auditory imagining could not be the wanted result in this case. So the question remains whether agent causation can be brought in to save the day for the causal theory. I shall take up one particularly pertinent aspect of this question in the final section.

(iv) *Agent Causation and Generalism*

There are various general worries about the notion of agent causation which are likely to be raised as potential objections to any causalism about action which invokes it. Here is not the place to attempt a wholesale defence of the notion of agent causation; I have attempted a fuller exposition of a version of the doctrine which I regard as viable, elsewhere.¹⁴ But it *is* appropriate, in an essay addressed to the views of Hart and Honoré, to consider the idea that might perhaps have prevented them from having embraced a doctrine that in some respects fits much better with many of their views than the broadly generalist view of causation they endorse – and that is generalism itself.

I remarked earlier that generalism might seem, on the face of it, hard to square with the idea that there are agent-causal relations. If one is inclined to think that the very essence of causality lies in conformity to some general principle, one might wonder how the assertion that an agent A has caused a result, R can count as the assertion of a causal relationship. For there are no general

¹³ See also McCann (1974: 456): “... if every action ... involves both a result and a causally more basic action, one would have to bring about an infinite series of further changes in order to bring about any change or set of changes at all”.

¹⁴ See my 2012, Ch. 8.

principles (presumably), subsuming agents, on the one hand, and the results they may be said to cause, on the other. One cannot, for example, say that there are descriptions of agent A and result R such that A-type agents always (or usually) produce R-type events – and that this is part of what it means for the relation between A and R to be a genuinely causal relation. Rather, when an agent produces a result, the relation seems to be a primitively *particular* one in which the agent is designated as being the *source* of the occurrence on this particular occasion. And nothing specific seems to be implied by such assertions about any law or regularity.

But at this point, one must ask what is the source of the generalist view. The answer, I think, is that it derives primarily from a concern with a very specific (albeit common) kind of causal context – namely, the kind of context in which one is attempting to isolate from a range of factors existing antecedently to some effect, those which were causally relevant to the effect in question. This is the kind of context which often pertains to the scientific investigation of causes – when one is looking, for example, for the causes of cancer, or global warming, or an increased crime rate. In this context, it is indeed pertinent to consider the question which of the factors up for consideration as a possibly relevant causal condition is found in regular relationship with occurrences of the effects in question, for if no such regular relationship can be discerned at all, even when confusing and noisy factors have been screened off, that effectively entirely undermines the claims of any given factor to be regarded as causally relevant to the effect in question. But we are concerned in cases like this with causes of a sort which I have elsewhere¹⁵ called ‘mattering’ causes – factors or circumstances whose presence is causally *relevant* to the occurrence (or non-occurrence, or persistence, or non-persistence) of some effect or other. And these are not the only sorts of causes in which we may be interested.

Sterling Lamprecht, a great champion of the distinctiveness and importance of particular agent-causes, writes as follows, in criticism of the view of Schlick that causation is nothing but ‘regularity of sequence’:

Sitting in my home at night, I may hear a knock at the door. Someone might chance to tell me that, always and invariably, according to a law of nature, sound results from the reverberation of a solid block of wood which is disturbed by blows upon it, and that this explanation is the full and entire causal account of the knocking. Would I be satisfied? Would you? Would even Moritz Schlick? The laws of nature in terms of which a particular knocking might be adequately described would probably not be of much interest to you or me or Schlick at that moment. I am sure that I should want to know who or what concretely was making blows on the door. I should want to identify the specific agent who or which did the knocking ... That there would be uniformity of result in similar cases would be of no account to me at the moment. (Lamprecht 1967: 121-2).

Lamprecht’s point here is that there is a kind of causal enquiry with respect to which questions about regular succession are simply moot. In this kind of causal enquiry, we are concerned to discover not causally relevant *factors*, but rather *particular* causes – particular things or agents (in a broad sense of ‘agent’), which are the answers to the sorts of ‘who’ and ‘what’ questions to which Lamprecht imagines himself wanting to know the answer in the quotation above. And with respect to questions such as these, a concern with generalist principles seems misplaced. It will of course be true that only certain kinds of thing with certain kinds of properties are able to produce certain kinds of effect – so that there are generalist *constraints* on the possible answers to these ‘who’ and ‘what’ questions – it cannot, for example, be a *spider* that has knocked on my door, for a spider does not have the power to produce a reverberation of that kind. But generality here plays a different role from the role it plays with respect to causal *factors*. Where causal *factors* are concerned, general

¹⁵ See my (2012), Ch 8.

relationships are arguably partly constitutive of the holding of the causal relationship in a particular instance, since it does not really seem to make sense to suggest, for example, that on this occasion (and this occasion alone) a cancer was caused, say, by someone's having turned around three times when a west wind was blowing.¹⁶ If there are *no* general relationships (even of a *ceteris paribus* sort) between such movements of persons and cancer, then that seems simply to settle the causal question in the negative. But where particular causes are concerned, there is no such constitutive relation. There is nothing standing in the way of my producing a result of a certain type just once. That I have done so just once does not render me any less of a cause.

The curious thing is that in many ways, Hart and Honoré are well on the way to the recognition of these points. They constantly stress (and lament) how different are the concerns of e.g. the historian and the lawyer from the concerns of the scientist; and their attempts to discern the principles governing our choice of what to regard as 'the' cause of any particular event or circumstance implicitly invoke, in many ways, the priority we accord to causes which are agents. In my view, their framework could easily accommodate the recognition that we need to distinguish causal *agents* from causal *factors*. But this distinction would also make possible, I think, a means of defending a version of causalism about action that is not impugned by any of the objections considered in sections (i)-(iii) above. The distinction between simple doings and the rest, if it were to be preserved, would then have to be drawn in a somewhat different way.

(v) *Conclusion*

How might it be drawn? We need not disagree that in pushing, bending, breaking, and the like, we have instances of a variety of agent causation more basic (in a certain sense) than any other. Such direct manipulations are the means by which we make impacts on physical objects in the world through the mode of touch – and it is particularly difficult in these sorts of case for interference by abnormal conditions, or the activities of others, to occur. To prevent the bar that I am bending from bending, for instance, your best bet is to stop me bending it – the intervention must be with me. Whereas to stop the fire that I am trying to cause from taking hold, you can throw water, stamp around on the ground, smother it with a blanket, etc. – because the successful attainment of my end is dependent in this case not only on my own active powers but on a variety of causal powers belonging to other objects that are highly sensitive to circumstances (in particular, the causal powers of combustible material), which you can affect. So there is a certain sort of imperviousness to interference in the direct manipulation cases – which doubtless encourages the thought that this is simply *doing*. But this *doing* is, I maintain, still the causing by me of results in the world. It is true that if we look to underpin this talk of causing with appropriate *events* to stand in relations of cause and effect we will go wrong. But we should not think that we need to underpin all talk of causing by substances with replacement talk of causation by events. Substances (and especially persons) are the primary causes we recognise and conceptualise – and we will only avoid paradox by explicitly according them in our philosophy the role we implicitly accord them in all our thought and talk about causation.

¹⁶ Perhaps to say that 'it does not make sense' is too strong. But in order to understand how such a claim could possibly be true, I think it is instructive to reflect that the easiest way of envisaging what might be going on here is to introduce an *agent* who (for example) responds to one's turning around three times while the wind is in the west by giving someone cancer. What this shows, I think, is that in the absence of a general relationship, we require the interposition of an agent-cause in order to be able to make sense of the causal claim at all.

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