CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN PHILOSOPHY

Natural agency
Natural agency

AN ESSAY ON THE CAUSAL THEORY OF ACTION

John Bishop
The University of Auckland, New Zealand
# Contents

Acknowledgments

INTRODUCTION

Notes

1. THE PROBLEM OF NATURAL AGENCY

I. A Theory in Search of Its Problem
   - The standard answer: Accounting for the action/behavior distinction
   - Locating agency in context: Our ethical perspective
   - What is philosophically puzzling about agency? The natural perspective on action
   - Skepticism about natural agency: A first statement
   - Is skepticism about action out of date?

II. Commitments of the Ethical Perspective
   - What kind of freedom of action does moral responsibility entail?
   - Freedom as satisfaction of the “could have done otherwise” condition
   - The Frankfurt counterexamples
   - Moral luck and the condition of control
   - The condition of control as a CDO condition
   - Actions as exercises of control

III. Commitments of the Natural Perspective
   - The “containment of indeterminism” response
   - Restating the problem of natural agency as independent of determinism
   - The “dilemma” formulation of the problem of natural agency
   - A radical separation of the problem of natural agency from the question of determinism
   - The “clash of explanation-types” formulation
   - Assessment of the clash of explanation-types formulation
The Dennett–MacKay complementarity thesis 35
Limitations of the complementarity thesis 36
An emphatic aside: Realism about action 37

IV. The Core of the Problem of Action – and a Plausible Solution 38
The agent-causation formulation of the problem of natural agency 38
Further advantages to the agent-causation formulation 41
The causal theory of action as a solution to the problem of natural agency 42

NOTES 44

2. THE VALUE OF A CAUSAL THEORY OF ACTION 49

I. A Traditional Approach to the Problem of Natural Agency 49

II. Is Action Possible under Determinism? 52
The consequence argument for incompatibilism 53
Questioning the main modal principle: Slote’s implicit appeal to CTA 54
Additional note: Earlier criticisms of the consequence argument 56
The place of CTA in compatibilist responses to the consequence argument 57
A CTA sufficient to defeat the consequence argument will need to be deterministic 59
The case against a specifically deterministic causal theory of action 61
Should incompatibilists seek to reject CTA altogether? 66

III. Is Action Possible under Indeterminism? 67
Agent-causation 68
Is a probabilistic causal theory of action possible? 70

IV. A Comparison with Dennett’s Elbow Room 74
Dennett’s negative case for reconciliatory naturalism 74
Reconstructing the natural evolution of agency: Its independence of the metaphysical problem 74
Dennett’s epistemologizing of the free will problem 76
Does intentional system theory alone resolve the problem of natural agency? 80

V. The Conditional Analysis Argument 83
Problems for the conditional analysis argument 84
# Developing a Causal Theory of Action

## I. Causal Analyses of Action
- A first approach to a CTA analysis
- Is a CTA analysis in terms of reasons even possible?
- How to make a positive case for a reason-based CTA analysis
- A first hypothesis for a CTA analysis
- Intentional action and action in general

## II. The Challenge of Akrasia
- Characterizing weak-willed action
- Are weak-willed actions a real possibility?
- How akrasia poses a problem for a CTA analysis:
  - Davidson’s notion of an unconditional practical judgment
  - Unconditional practical judgments construed as intentions
  - An independent argument for admitting intentions
  - The possibility of final stage akrasia
  - Akrasia as a problem for CTA’s causal condition

## 4. The Challenge of Causal Deviance
- Causally deviant counterexamples to CTA-H
- How deviant cases challenge CTA
- Match with the action-plan as necessary for nondeviant action
- Making precise the condition of match with the action-plan
- The problem of basic deviance
- Excluding basic deviance: The causal chain must constitute practical reasoning
- Excluding basic deviance: Causation by virtually concurrent intentions
- Excluding basic deviance: The causal immediacy strategy
- Excluding basic deviance: Volitions
- May the exclusion of basic deviance be left to future empirical enquiry?

## Notes
5. **Coping with Basic Deviance** 148

I. The Promise of the Sensitivity Strategy 148  
_Counterfactual and differential explanation versions of the sensitivity condition_ 150

II. Alternative Versions of the Sensitivity Strategy 151  
_The Frankfurt examples again_ 151  
_The reverse behavioral censor_ 153  
_A problem for the differential explanation version?_ 153  
_A teleological construal of the sensitivity condition_ 154

III. Assessing the Sensitivity Strategy 155  
_Prosthetic aids to action_ 155  
_Heteromesial causal chains_ 156  
_Should a sensitivity CTA analysis also exclude heteromesy?_ 157  
_Heterogeneity among the heteromesial cases_ 158  
_Considerations about responsibility as reinforcing the deviance of preemptively heteromesial cases_ 160  
_Implications of preemptively heteromesial cases for a CTA analysis_ 162  
_A consilience of grounds for rejecting a sensitivity CTA analysis_ 165

IV. Sensitive and Sustained Causation 167  
_Sustained causation_ 167  
_Servosystems and feedback loops_ 168  
_Preemptive heteromesy again_ 169  
_Appeal to the detailed architecture of feedback loops_ 170  
_The final breakthrough?_ 171

NOTES 172

6. **Limits for the Causal Theory of Action** 176

I. Dealing with the Agent-Causationist Syndrome 176  
_The story so far_ 176  
_In what sense is basic action primitive?_ 177  
_Other aspects of the agent-causationist syndrome_ 180

II. The Place of the Causal Theory of Action in the Wider Project of Reconciliatory Naturalism 184  
_A fundamental problem ignored?_ 184
CTA-BI solves the problem of natural agency only given natural realism about intentional states 187

How much of a problem of natural moral autonomy remains once CTA resolves the problem of natural agency? 190

CTA and the vindication of moral responsibility 191

NOTES 194

Bibliography 197

Index 203
Acknowledgments

In parts of Chapters 4 and 5 of this book, I have recast (and, occasionally, directly reused) material previously published in my articles, “Is Agent-Causality a Conceptual Primitive?” *Synthèse*, 67 (1986): 225–47; and “Sensitive and Insensitive Responses to Deviant Action,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 65 (1987): 452–69. The copyright over the first of these articles is held by D. Reidel Publishing Company: I am grateful to Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, Holland, for permission to reuse material from this article. For permission to reprint material from the second article, I am grateful to the copyright holders, the Australasian Association of Philosophy.

My work on this book was assisted by a period of study leave granted by the Council of the University of Auckland, and spent partly in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Calgary and partly at Darwin College, Cambridge. I thank the Council for granting me leave and my kind hosts at both Calgary and Cambridge for helping me to make productive use of it. I am grateful to Alastair Anderson for his assistance in compiling the index.

_Auckland_  
_October, 1989_  

John Bishop