

*The* POWER *of* AGENCY

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## *Abstract*

### The Power of Agency

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My dissertation addresses a foundational problem in the philosophy of action, that of explaining the distinction between actions and mere events. Actions, I argue, have a uniquely active component that distinguishes them from mere events and which can be explained in terms of effort. Effort has several features: it is attributed directly to agents; it is a causal power that each agent alone possesses and employs; it enables agents causally to activate, sustain, and control their capacities during the performance of an action; and its presence comes in varying degrees of strength. After defending an effort-based account of action and criticizing what is known as the standard story of action, I apply my account to situations in which an agent displays strength of will, such as when one struggles to perform an action while overcoming a persistent urge to do otherwise. I conclude by offering an explanation of mental action that demonstrates the extent of our powers of agency within the domain of the mental.

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*To My Parents, John and Elizabeth Brent*

*And to My One and Only Younger Brother, David Andrew Brent*

*With Love and Gratitude*

## *Introduction*

Many of the actions that we perform are self-initiated, self-sustained, self-controlled, and uniquely active. For instance, when I move my body as I walk along the sidewalk, I initiate the movement of my legs, sustain their movement as I continue to walk, control the pace and direction in which they move, stop their movement if need be, and am active in the sense that such coordinated movement is not merely occurring, but is something that I am making happen, something that I am doing. Similarly, when I imagine the appearance of a familiar and beloved object, I initiate the activity of the requisite cognitive capacity, sustain its activity as I continue to imagine the object's visible features, control its activity as I manipulate the way in which the object imaginatively appears to me, stop the activity if need be, and am active in the sense that such coordinated cognitive activity is not merely happening, but is something that I am making happen, a mental action that I am performing.

In recent work in Anglo-American philosophy of mind and action, the explanation of action has tended to obscure, if not entirely ignore, the fact that much action is self-initiated, self-sustained, self-controlled, and uniquely active. This fact has been obscured because of an underlying assumption that when we explain the occurrence of any given action, we should cite the relevant beliefs, desires, intentions, and other motivational factors of the agent, and that such motivational factors together constitute the cause of the bodily movements and cognitive activity that transpires during the performance of a bodily or mental action. This form of explanation is explicitly *reductive* insofar as *the causal role* of the agent in the production of her own action is explained exclusively in terms of the causal role of the relevant beliefs, desires, intentions, and other motivational factors that

take place within her, not the agent herself. That is, the agent participates in the actions that she performs only to the extent that the action in question has been caused by those of her motivational factors that are relevant to the explanation of what is happening. From within this reductive explanatory framework, to say of a particular action that it is self-initiated, self-sustained, self-controlled, and uniquely active is shorthand for saying that the action in question has been caused by the relevant desires, beliefs, intentions, and other such motivational factors, as opposed to the agent to whom we ascribe them.

What I aim to do in this dissertation is undermine this reductive form of explanation and offer an alternative conception of action in its place. In **CHAPTER ONE**, I defend an alternative account of *agent causation*. I begin by arguing against four existing accounts, offered by Roderick Chisholm, Richard Taylor, Timothy O'Connor, and E. J. Lowe, respectively.<sup>1</sup> I claim that each account is problematic because of the way in which it depicts the agent-causal relation and the kind of event to which the agent is supposedly related in this way. For example, Chisholm argues that the agent can directly bring about an event within her own brain which then causes the relevant bodily movements to occur, and that she can do so without performing any other action as a way of making this cerebral event occur. Taylor contends that the agent can directly bring about a basic bodily action, such as a simple bodily movement, and that she can do so without performing another action in order to make this happen. O'Connor claims that the agent can directly bring about an executive intention to act in the circumstances at hand and that she can do so without performing another action as a means of making this event transpire. And Lowe, too, maintains that the agent can directly bring about a choice or decision to act, which he construes as a basic mental action that the

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<sup>1</sup> Proper citations to the authors referred to in this Introduction can be found in the relevant chapters.

agent can perform spontaneously and without cause, and which in the appropriate circumstances can bring about the requisite bodily movement.

Against these accounts of agent causation, I argue that although there need not be any other *action* that the agent performs as the medium through which she brings about the relevant basic action, it does not follow that there is *nothing else* that the agent must do in order to make this occur. In particular, it does not follow that the agent directly and immediately performs a basic action without exerting some kind of *effort* in the process of doing so. In defense of this claim, I present three examples that are intended to motivate the idea that during the performance of each and every basic action, the agent must exert effort in order to causally initiate, sustain, and control the activation of the relevant bodily and cognitive capacities. The examples provide what I take to be a convincing case for the claim that, even during the performance of a basic action, the agent must exert effort, however minimal in duration or limited in intensity, in order to causally activate the relevant capacities, and that effort is something we attribute directly to the agent herself. The agent's exertion of effort, I argue, can be understood as the employment of what I call the faculty of *will-power*. As I describe it, the faculty of will-power has seven interrelated features, the sixth and seventh of which are discussed in chapters two and three, respectively. The faculty enables the agent to activate her own capacities during the performance of an action, it is the means by which the agent is causally related to her bodily and cognitive capacities, it is essentially causal in the sense that its employment by the agent always brings about some event or other, it is neither a bodily nor a cognitive capacity but is distinct in its own right, the agent can use the faculty in light of her assessment and understanding of her motivational factors that support a given action, and it is not merely active or inactive but can be used with varying degrees of intensity and strength. The agent's

exertion of effort and the faculty of will-power are omitted in the accounts of agent causation offered by Chisholm, Taylor, O'Connor, and Lowe, and that, I claim, is why they are insufficient.

In **CHAPTER TWO**, I argue against what has come to be known as *the standard story* of action. The standard story occupies a prominent though controversial place within contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of mind and action, one whose roots trace back at least to the work of Donald Davidson. The story depicts bodily actions as events that are caused by and made intelligible through the appropriate relations between the agent's beliefs, desires, intentions, and other motivational factors. The story is an event-causal account of bodily action, insofar as any given action is understood to be a discrete event that is caused in the appropriate way by the onset of the motivational factors that render that action intelligible, where the onset of the relevant motivational factors is itself an event that stands in the appropriate causal relation with the bodily movements that figure in or comprise the action in question. The standard story is thus a paradigmatic instance of the reductive form of action-explanation mentioned above, since it explains bodily action as the effect of the appropriate causal relations among the relevant motivational factors, not the agent herself, thereby *reducing* the causal role of the agent in the production of her own bodily action to that of her motivational factors.

I argue that the standard story fails as an account of bodily action. Traditionally, proponents of the standard story have attempted to respond to two problems that have been raised against it, that of *deviant causal chains* and that of the *absent agent*. My argument against the standard story focuses on a specific version of the problem of the absent agent, since even if the story is modified so as to solve the problem of deviance, its defenders must ensure that the agent who performs an action in non-deviant circumstances *stands in the correct relation* with her own body and bodily movements

during her performance of the action in question, in contrast with the relation in which the agent stands with her body and bodily movements when they occur without or in spite of her involvement therein. After presenting two versions of the problem of absence, I discuss two lines of response that have been offered to it. The first response includes modifications of the standard story offered by Michael Bratman and J. David Velleman. According to Bratman, the problem of the absent agent can be solved if we equip ourselves with the notion of a temporally extended higher-order *self-governing policy*, the proper functioning of which ensures that the agent is an active participant in the actions that she performs. For Velleman, the agent becomes an active participant in her own actions through possessing a special *desire*, the desire to act in accordance with those of her motivational factors which provide the strongest reason for acting in a particular way.

The second line of response, offered by François Schroeter and Markus Schlosser respectively, emerges out of their criticism of the modifications suggested by Bratman and Velleman. In their own slightly different way, Schroeter and Schlosser argue that Bratman and Velleman overlook a *more fundamental* kind of control that an agent can exert over her own body and bodily movements during the actions that she performs. Although I agree with their criticisms of Bratman and Velleman, I argue that the respective accounts of this more fundamental kind of control offered by Schroeter and Schlosser are problematic in their own right, on the grounds that both overlook the crucial causal role that the agent's exertion of effort plays during her performance of even the most basic of actions. After arguing against Schroeter and Schlosser, I end by introducing an example that I believe very seriously undermines the central tenets of the standard story, a case in which an agent displays what I describe as *strength of will* in overcoming a particularly potent motivational factor that threatens to undermine the action that she is in the midst of performing. I present a number of

replies that the defender of the standard story might offer in light of the example and respond to each in turn, and I end the chapter by addressing what is often referred to as *Davidson's Challenge*.

In **CHAPTER THREE**, I return to the notion of strength of will and explore it in more detail, by presenting and then criticizing Richard Holton's recent account thereof. I focus on Holton's account because he is one of the few contemporary philosophers working in the Anglo-American tradition who is interested in the possibility of strength of will, and, more importantly, his own account employs a notion of will-power that is similar to, though crucially different from, the notion of will-power that I introduce in this dissertation. Holton presents his account of strength of will by way of his criticism of what he calls the *Humean* and *Modified Humean* accounts of action, both of which are instances of the standard story of action as it was introduced in chapter two. According to Holton, such accounts fail to explain cases in which an agent displays strength of will, which he describes as situations where an agent adheres to a resolution in the face of a compelling desire to the contrary. Holton claims that the Humean and Modified Humean accounts of action fail to explain strength of will because they omit the possibility that an agent might struggle to adhere to a resolution in the face of a potent desire to do otherwise. After defending Holton's argument against these accounts of action, I present and then criticize his positive account of strength of will. According to Holton, we can explain how it is that an agent is able to adhere to a resolution in the face of a compelling desire to the contrary by adding an additional motivational factor to the Humean and Modified Humean accounts of action, namely, the faculty of will-power. Unlike how the notion of will-power has been used in earlier chapters of this dissertation, Holton restricts its application to the domain of the *mental*, insofar as will-power is understood by Holton to be a cognitive capacity. In particular, Holton claims that an agent employs will-power only when

*refusing* to revise and reconsider a resolution in the face of a compelling desire that threatens to undermine that very resolution. I argue against Holton's account of strength of will on the grounds (a) that he has not adequately explained *how it is* that an agent can strengthen the motivational force of a resolution by refusing to revise and reconsider it, given the way that he describes this process, and (b) that his conception of will-power is *unnecessarily intellectual*, insofar as its application is limited to the mental act of refusal. I end the chapter by describing what I think is missing from Holton's account, something that was introduced and described at length in chapter one, namely, the distinctively *active* contribution of the agent in causing the actions that she performs, by initiating, sustaining, and controlling the manner of activation of her own bodily capacities during the performance thereof.

In **CHAPTER FOUR**, I introduce and defend an account of mental action that builds upon the alternative account of agent causation presented in chapter one. My defense comes by way of critical engagement with an account of mental action defended by Galen Strawson. I argue that although Strawson is correct to claim that an agent can catalytically initiate a mental event in which content becomes present to conscious awareness and that in such circumstances the content that comes to mind has not been constructed by that act of initiation, his positive account is problematic. I argue against Strawson's account of mental action on two grounds. First, I claim that his account employs a controversial notion of action that is simply assumed to be true without an explicit argument in defense thereof, and that there are plausible alternative conceptions of action that do not restrict mental action in the way suggested by Strawson. Second, I claim (a) that Strawson's account obscures the relation in which the agent can stand with the activation of his own cognitive capacities during the performance of a mental action and (b) that *pace* Strawson, the mental action



of catalytic initiation itself is plausibly one that the agent can cause through the exertion of effort required to initiate the activation of the relevant cognitive capacities.

After undermining Strawson's account, I present an alternative account of mental action that develops out of the account of agent causation defended in chapter one. I argue that *effort* plays a causal role in the performance of mental action. Through the exertion of effort the agent causally activates and employs her cognitive capacities, both in cases where she catalytically initiates a mental event in which content becomes present to conscious awareness and in cases where she sustains the ongoing activation of a cognitive capacity. Crucially, I suggest, during the ongoing performance of a mental action, the agent stands in an *active* relation with her own cognitive capacities as she continually sustains their activation or manipulates the manner in which they are activating. I claim that we can understand the notion of effort and the agent's exertion thereof using a terminological distinction found in Aristotle, between two different ways in which a capacity can be activated. The exertion of effort by the agent is a form of *energetic* activation of the faculty of will-power, which when active is complete insofar as it is not the development of a process from a state of potentiality towards a state of actuality, but is a blindly causal power that in normal conditions where all goes well *kinetically* activates the relevant cognitive capacities. I end the chapter by suggesting that if the alternative account of mental action presented here is correct, there is good reason for us to revise a number of fundamental assumptions that are operative within contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of mind and action and thereby expand our repertoire of conceptual resources. Doing so, I suggest, illuminates the basic form of control that an agent can exert over her own cognitive capacities during the performance of a mental action, and enables us to account for the active and passive relations in which an agent can stand with her own cognitive capacities, relations that are

otherwise obscured when we focus exclusively upon mental states, events, and processes and the causal and functional relations between them.

## *Chapter One*

### *An Alternative Account of Agent Causation*

My goal in this chapter is to defend an account of agent causation. According to proponents of agent causation, when an agent performs an action, he plays a unique role in its causal production. I argue that current accounts of agent causation are insufficient insofar as they overlook the role of a distinctive kind of *effort* involved in the performance of every action, and which explains the distinctively active nature of action as such. The account of agent causation developed here exploits the notion of will-power, understood as a distinct faculty, to explain the self-generating nature of the activity that is characteristic of action. As we shall see, an analysis of the type of effort that is a distinguishing feature of will-power provides good reason to conclude that the faculty is neither a bodily nor a cognitive capacity, but something distinct in its own right, functioning so as to enable the agent to causally initiate, sustain, and control his bodily and cognitive capacities during the performance of a self-generated action.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first, I set the stage for the presentation of my own view by providing a brief summary of the various notions of agent causation that have been developed by Roderick Chisholm, Richard Taylor, Timothy O'Connor, and E.J. Lowe.<sup>2</sup> Here, I describe their respective views as sympathetically as possible, merely noting the claims that will be

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<sup>2</sup> The relevant texts are: Roderick Chisholm, "Human Freedom and the Self", originally presented as The University of Kansas Lindley Lecture in 1964, reprinted in Gary Watson, ed., *Free Will*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 26-37; Richard Taylor, *Action and Purpose* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966); Timothy O'Connor, *Persons and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000), "Agent Causation", originally published in Timothy O'Connor, ed., *Agents, Causes, and Events: Essays on Indeterminism and Free Will* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1995), reprinted in Gary Watson, ed., *Free Will*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 257-284, and "Agent-Causal Power" in Toby Handfield, ed., *Dispositions and Causes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 189-214; and E. J. Lowe, *Personal Agency: The Metaphysics of Mind and Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

criticized later. In the second section, I highlight the weaknesses of each of their respective accounts of the notion of agent causation and provide my own account that builds upon their insights while avoiding their pitfalls. By the end of the chapter, I hope to make a case for the plausibility of the idea of agent causation, thereby clearing the ground for the next chapter in which I attempt to undermine what is commonly known as the standard story of action.

Before beginning, it is important to make a preliminary remark about the context in which the four philosophers to be considered here are writing. The context is what we can call “the problem of free will”. One way to understand the problem is as follows: the idea of an action that is performed freely seems to be the idea of an action for which the agent is morally responsible, and the relevant notion of moral responsibility seems to require that it was within the power of the agent either to perform or not to perform the action in question. According to defenders of agent causation, to say that it was “within the power of the agent” to perform or refrain from performing the action in question is to say that there were no sufficient conditions in place prior to the performance or non-performance of the action in question, such that it was not determined in advance that the agent would perform or refrain from performing that action. This is one way of understanding the notion of “freedom” as it has been employed in the context of addressing the problem of free will. Here, the agent is understood to be free just to the extent that it was within his power to perform or refrain from performing the relevant action.

Much philosophical work has been exerted in an attempt to spell out the notion of freedom in this context, as well as the related notions of determinism and moral responsibility. However, this wider context will not be at issue in what follows. It will not be at issue because the goal here is not that of spelling out the conditions under which a course of action is or is not within the power of an

agent to perform in the sense relevant to the notion of freedom and the assessment of moral responsibility. Rather, the goal is to provide an account of action that is plausible in its own right, independently of any possible connections with the notions of freedom, determinism, and moral responsibility.

### 1. *Recent Historical Background*

In the first section of this chapter, I set the stage for the presentation of my own view by providing a brief summary of the notion of agent causation offered by Chisholm, Taylor, O'Connor, and Lowe.<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting two things to keep in mind as we progress. First, at the heart of each account of agent causation is a shared and fundamental commitment, one that will figure in the account developed below, namely, that when an agent performs an action, there is a unique and crucial sense in which he plays an active role in its causal production. Shedding light on the nature of this active role is essential to making plausible the idea of agent causation and demonstrating its importance in the explanation of action. Second, although they will not be explicitly addressed until the later sections of this chapter, my critical remarks will focus on two related points, namely, (a) the way in which each account depicts the nature of the agent-causal relation and (b) the kind of event to which the agent is causally related in this way. Keeping these points in mind will highlight the relevant similarities and differences between the different accounts of agent causation that will be criticized below.

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<sup>3</sup> I provide a much more elaborate and careful description of the details of each of their respective accounts in an Appendix to this chapter.

Now, according to Chisholm, the agent-causal relation is not a form of event-causation, but is something unique to the realm of human agency. The agent-causal relation obtains between the agent as such, and an event within his own brain. In suitably normal conditions, the agent is able to directly bring about particular events within his own brain, events which then cause the appropriate bodily motions to occur. Crucially, the agent does not directly bring about the relevant bodily motions, but only the cerebral event which initiates the motion in question. The agent brings about the cerebral event simply and directly: there is no other action that the agent performs, and there is no other change that the agent undergoes, which brings about that event. When the agent as such directly brings about the cerebral event in question, his doing so is a basic action, and there is nothing else—no other agents or events external or internal to the agent in question—that brings about the relevant event. When the agent acts in this way, he is an unmoved mover.

According to Taylor, too, the agent-causal relation is not a form of event-causation, but is something exclusive to the realm of human agency. However, for Taylor, the agent-causal relation obtains between the agent as such and the relevant basic action, whether of the bodily or mental type. That is, the agent-causal relation is understood to be a direct and unmediated relation between an agent and the basic action that he performs. There is no other action that the agent performs, neither through trying to perform the action in question nor by undergoing a change of any sort, which brings about the basic action in question. The agent actively intervenes in the series of discrete events that precede the performance of the relevant basic action, making it occur. Although the processes and mechanisms by which such basic actions occur cannot be described, says Taylor, each agent knows independently of observation which basic actions are within his immediate control and which are not. When the agent knows that a particular basic action is within his immediate

control, the agent knows that he himself is the source of his own activity, that he himself is the cause of what is happening.

On O'Connor's account of agent causation, the agent-causal relation as such is no different in kind from ordinary event-causal relations. At heart, the very same causal relation obtains, which is one of singular causal production. The crucial difference is that the agent-causal relation obtains between the agent and an appropriate mental event that then triggers later features of the action in question. The mental event is an intention to act in the circumstances in question, and it serves to resolve the agent's uncertainty about which course of action to undertake in those circumstances. The causal production of the intention is understood by O'Connor to be a simple mental event the onset of which produces the relevant sequence of events that comprise the intended bodily action when conditions are suitably normal and all goes well. The agent-causal relation so understood is made possible by the fact that the agent possesses distinctive causal powers that emerge as a byproduct of a range of internal properties of the agent. The presence of the internal properties enables the agent himself to produce the intention to act through exercising the relevant causal powers. According to O'Connor, when the agent produces an intention to act in a particular scenario, the agent's motivational factors, such as his beliefs, desires, and other attitudes, incline him to do so at that moment in time but they do not cause the agent to exercise his causal power. In fact, *nothing* directly causes the agent to exercise his causal power on any given occasion, since the first element in the sequence of causally related events that leads from the onset of the intention to act to the intended action is not an event but a particular *substance*; namely, the *agent* himself. As a particular substance, the agent is a concrete entity that is capable of enduring through time and across alterations in some of its external relations and properties, and of being wholly present at each

moment of an extended temporal interval, and no different in this sense from other particular substances, like tables, chairs, coffee mugs, and laptop computers. Unlike other such substances, though, the agent possesses mental properties and capacities that enable him to represent possible courses of action and have beliefs and desires concerning the possibilities in question, and, crucially, the distinctive power of agency that the agent possesses is not reducible to the powers of the properties that enable the agent to produce the relevant intention. The power to produce an intention is unique at least insofar as when the appropriate conditions obtain, it is directly within the causal control of the agent himself.

Lastly, according to Lowe, the agent-causal relation itself is not unique to the realm of human agency but is a species of substance causation. Only substances possess causal powers and causal liabilities, and as such they are the only kind of entity that is capable of *doing* anything. On this view, agents, such as particular human beings, tables, chairs, coffee mugs and laptop computers, are individual substances that can persist through time and across various sorts of changes. In the specific context of human beings and the actions that they perform, when an agent causes the relevant event to occur, he does so by willing to do so.<sup>4</sup> The act of will is understood to be the act of choosing or deciding to do something, and it is the most basic action that an agent can perform. As such, it is a species of mental event that has an action-producing function and an intentional content that takes as its proper object a particular type of event. By willing to do such-and-so, says Lowe, the agent attempts to bring about an action-result, that is, an event that can be brought about by the agent or by some other means, such as when the agent's right arm moves in an upward direction.

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<sup>4</sup> The context in which Lowe presents his account of agent causation is one in which he is also defending a "libertarian" notion of rational action, where rational action—that is, action that is performed in the light of the agent's awareness of reasons that support his doing so—is not caused by anything at all, neither by the agent himself nor by anything else, but is entirely spontaneous. For his defence of a "libertarian" notion of rational action, see his *Personal Agency: The Metaphysics of Mind and Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. chapters 7 through 9.



When such an event is brought about by the agent, it is an action that he performs; otherwise, it remains a mere action-result. Crucially, the act of will itself is neither causal nor caused: it is not causal because it can *fail* to bring about the sought-for action-result, and it is not caused by the agent or by anything else because it is the most basic action that the agent can perform, *internal* to the agent in the same way that bodily sensations are.<sup>5</sup> Rather, the will is a spontaneous ability that can be directly exercised by the agent in light of the considerations that he deems to support his doing so on any given occasion.

In spite of their differences both subtle and obvious, at the heart of each account of agent causation is a shared and fundamental commitment. In different ways, each account of agent causation that we have considered takes seriously the idea that, at least in a range of central circumstances, when an agent performs an action, the agent is in some way *active*. The way in which the agent is active in the performance of some actions distinguishes those actions from superficially similar events in which the agent plays no such role. When the agent has brought about an action of the relevant type, he does so by exerting a causal power that he alone possesses. Chisholm expresses this point when he says that in virtue of being the sole and unique cause of at least some of his own actions, the agent is in a position to know that he is capable of making particular events occur in a direct and unmediated way. Taylor says something similar. He claims that each agent can know without observation which motions and changes in his body are within his immediate control and which are not, a distinction that concerns the *source* of the motion or change in question. When the agent is the source of his own actions, says Taylor, he is actively and directly controlling what is happening, and when the agent is actively and directly controlling his own actions in this way, he is

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<sup>5</sup> I return to both of these claims in the text.

their cause. For O'Connor, the agent is able to directly cause a state of intention to act in the circumstances at hand, an intention which then causes the relevant sequence of events that comprise the intended action, when all goes well in suitably normal conditions. The causal formation of the intention is a simple mental event that is made possible by the fact that the agent possesses distinctive causal powers that are directly within his control, powers that he can exercise in light of his motivational factors. And Lowe, too, places a similar kind of emphasis on the active role of the agent in the production of at least some of his own actions, though the active role in question is not causal in nature. According to Lowe, when an agent causes an event to occur, he does so by acting in a particular way, by willing to cause an event of that type. The agent's act of will is understood to be the act of choice or decision, the most basic, mental action that the agent is capable of performing. The will is a spontaneous ability, the use of which consists in the onset of a choice or a decision to perform a particular kind of action, and is directly used by the agent himself. Crucially, the will itself does not cause the relevant intended action, but is confined to the agent in the same way as are his sensations and other internal events.

Thus, although employed slightly differently in each account, the idea that the agent plays an active role in the performance of at least some actions is central to the very idea of agent causation and will be a fundamental feature of the alternative account that will emerge below. As we shall see, shedding light on this active role is not an easy task, but doing so is crucial to making plausible the idea of agent causation and demonstrating its importance in the explanation of action.

## 2. *An Alternative Account of Agent Causation*

Now, there are many ways in which each of the above-mentioned accounts of agent causation can be criticized, as each incorporates numerous controversial claims and assumptions. For example, one might criticize Chisholm and Taylor on the grounds that they have not provided enough information about the nature of the agent that is capable of employing agent-causal powers and by doing so they have left the nature of the agent-causal relation a mystery.<sup>6</sup> One might criticize O'Connor's view on the grounds that, in attempting to explain the nature of the agent and the causal powers that he can be said to possess, the account of the agent that he offers is not plausible, since it employs a questionable notion of emergence.<sup>7</sup> And one might criticize the account offered by Lowe on the grounds that it employs a radical notion of substance causation, a notion that might be implausible in its own right.<sup>8</sup> While these lines of criticism are ones that might be worth pursuing in detail, they will not be at issue here. Instead, my criticism will focus on the ways in which they depict the nature of the agent-causal relation. As we shall see, each of their respective explanations of this central point is problematic in different ways, and understanding precisely why this is the case will enable us to see our way towards the correct account of agent causation.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Taylor's own criticism, published years later, on these very grounds, in his paper "Agent & Patient: Is There a Distinction?" in *Erkenntnis*, Volume 18, Number 2, September 1982, pp. 223-232.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Jaegwon Kim's critical discussion of the notion of emergence in his paper "Emergence: Core Ideas and Issues" in *Synthese*, Volume 151, Number 3, July 2006, pp. 547-559.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, C. G. Pulmans's critical review of E. J. Lowe's *op. cit.*, in *Ratio*, Volume 23, Number 2, June 2010, pp. 232-236.

### 2.1. *The Agent-Causal Relation as Depicted by Chisholm, Taylor, and O'Connor*

The major difficulty shared by the accounts of agent causation offered by Chisholm, Taylor, and O'Connor concerns the way in which they depict the nature of the agent-causal relation, a problem that, as we shall see, has been partially addressed in Lowe's own version.<sup>9</sup> At heart, the problem is this: Chisholm, Taylor, and O'Connor claim that it is the agent *as such* that is able to exert the relevant kind of causal power. Even though there are numerous conditions that must be in place in order for the agent to employ the relevant causal power, there is *nothing else* that the agent does when employing it. Recall that for Chisholm, the agent can directly and in an unmediated fashion bring about a cerebral event which causes the action in question, and he does so simply, without doing anything else; for Taylor, the agent can directly and in an unmediated fashion bring about a basic action, and he does so simply, without doing anything else; and for O'Connor, the agent can directly and in an unmediated manner bring about an executive intention to act, a causal power that is made possible by the fact that the agent possesses a range of internal properties that sustain it, but whose employment by the agent can be directly within his control. For each, the agent neither exerts effort to bring about the action or event in question nor does he undergo any change whatsoever when exploiting his agential capacities: when they are directly available to him, he simply activates them as he sees fit.

Why is this problematic? The answer is this: contrary to what Chisholm, Taylor, and O'Connor claim, an agent must exert a distinctive kind of *effort* in order to perform even a simple, basic action, of either the bodily or mental type. Recall that Chisholm employed a notion of basic action and claimed that when an agent brings about or causes a basic action, there is *no other action*

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<sup>9</sup> I say "partially addressed" because Lowe's own version will be criticized on similar grounds.

*that the agent performs* in order to bring about the event in question. And although for Taylor the agent-causal relation is one that obtains not between the agent and a cerebral event but between the agent and a basic bodily or mental action, the same point applies: in the appropriate conditions and when all goes well, there is *no other action that the agent performs* in order to bring about the basic action in question. For O'Connor, too, in the appropriate conditions and when all goes well, the executive intention to act in the circumstances in question is brought about simply and directly by the agent himself, and the agent *does not perform any other action* in order to bring about the requisite intention to act. In each case, since the relevant event in question is thought to be a basic action, there cannot be an intermediary action the performance of which caused the basic action in question, or else the intermediary action would be the most basic action that the agent is capable of performing.<sup>10</sup> Thus, given the way that Chisholm, Taylor, and O'Connor understand the notion of a basic action and the relation that obtains between an agent and his performance thereof, there cannot be any other *action* that stands as the medium through which the agent brings about any given basic action.

However, it does not follow that there is *nothing else* that the agent must do in order to bring about a basic action of either the bodily or mental type. Although there might not be another *action* that the agent performs in order to bring about a basic action, it does not follow that the agent simply, directly, and immediately performs a basic action without exerting some kind of *effort* in the process of doing so. For example, imagine an agent who is asked to lift and hold a heavy object with his right arm. In lifting and holding the heavy object, the agent must exert effort in order to do so, perhaps while experiencing pain or tension in the relevant muscles and joints. The effort required to

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<sup>10</sup> Another option is to *deny* that there is any such thing as a basic action. Given that each of the accounts of agent causation that we are considering accepts that there are basic actions, I shall set aside this possibility.

lift and hold the heavy object is something that the agent is doing or exerting, as anyone who has done so can attest, but the effort itself need not be thought of as the action that the agent is performing. The action is the lifting and holding of the heavy object and the effort is a feature or property of the performance of the action, but not itself the action being performed.<sup>11</sup>

The point is essential to a correct understanding of action, even of the basic kind. Even in the case of basic actions, the performance thereof requires at least a minimal exertion of effort on the part of the agent, as among the causal means by which the agent is able to activate and employ the relevant capacities. The effort that is required is not obvious in every circumstance, but it is present<sup>12</sup> nonetheless and its presence is especially manifested in (1) cases of *paralysis* and *partial success* and (2) the distinction between the *active* and *passive* relations in which an agent can stand with his own bodily and cognitive capacities. Consider first the notion of paralysis. In conditions of paralysis, effort can be manifested as such in the failure to bring about a basic action. For example, imagine an agent who is awakening from surgery after having been administered a general anesthetic and muscle relaxant, and who has yet to realize his present condition. Imagine further that in this state of disordered ignorance, the agent attempts to perform a basic bodily action, such as moving a finger or opening his mouth. In such conditions, by attempting to perform the basic action in question the agent can come to the sudden and perhaps frightening realization that he remains paralyzed.<sup>13</sup> In coming to this realization, the agent becomes aware of his *exertion of effort* in his

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<sup>11</sup> Note that I am careful to say that effort is not “the” action that the agent is performing in such cases. It does not follow that such effort is not *an* action. I shall say more below about the notion of effort and the kind of property that it is, after having introduced the related notion of will-power.

<sup>12</sup> Note that the sense in which effort is “present” is *not* one in which such effort must figure in or otherwise be registered within the agent’s conscious experience when he is engaged in the performance of an action.

<sup>13</sup> There are cases like this called “anesthesia awareness” or “intraoperative awareness”. According to the American Society of Anesthesiologists, such cases occur approximately 1 to 2 times per every 1,000 uses of general anesthesia.

attempt to activate a bodily capacity. Crucially, the agent is doing something, namely, employing what I shall henceforth refer to as his *will-power*<sup>14</sup> in his failed attempt to activate a bodily capacity, but he is not performing the basic bodily action in question. In such cases there will be *some* kind of event occurring as he engages in the exertion of effort so as to activate a bodily capacity, something that occurs as a direct causal consequence of his exertion of effort in such strange circumstances.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of how we describe the details of the scenario, though, the point remains: by attempting but failing to perform a basic bodily action in circumstances of this kind, the agent can come to the realization that he is actively doing something, namely, exerting effort in his attempt to perform a basic action.

We need not imagine such extraordinary circumstances in order to discover that effort is required in the performance of every basic bodily action. For example, imagine an agent whose bodily movements are beginning to stray from the dance routine that he is in the midst of practicing, and who comes to realize that his movements are only partially successful in following the routine. His failure is not total, since he remains in motion, but he is only partially successful in ensuring that his performance accords well with the routine in question.<sup>16</sup> In such conditions, the agent can adjust and correct his bodily movements as he continues to perform them, in the attempt to make his

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<sup>14</sup> Although the notion of will-power that I am using shall become clearer as we proceed, it is worth noting something that I hope the example about to be introduced above makes clear, namely, that the notion of will-power is *not* that of a decision- or choice-making capacity, or a capacity to form an intention, or a more general cognitive capacity broadly understood. Rather, the notion is akin to that of a *causal power* and it occupies a distinct and, I think, an important position in contrast with that of cognitive capacities, on the one hand, and bodily capacities, on the other.

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, since I think that will-power is *essentially causal*, in contrast to Lowe, I believe that an event will always occur in cases of bodily paralysis. The event will not be the basic action that the agent is attempting to perform, but it is something that he is bringing about as a result of his exertion of effort in the conditions of paralysis. I will return briefly to this issue below, when considering Lowe's position in more detail.

<sup>16</sup> To clarify: suppose that the dance routine includes a double-pirouette and that while the agent is in the midst of practicing this movement, he realizes that his second pirouette is imperfect in some way, though he manages to complete the move.

performance better follow the routine. In making the necessary adjustments, the agent must *control* the movement and direction of his body and body parts, however subtle this might be, and he does not do so automatically but by *causing* such alterations to occur. Crucially, the distinctive kind of causal control that the agent can exert over the movements of his body is *not* itself a mental action. As anyone who has controlled the direction and movements of his own limbs can attest, the agent does not redirect the movement of his arm, say, by entertaining a thought to that effect, or by choosing, deciding, or intending to do so, or by imagining the requisite alteration, or by remembering how to do so, or by attending carefully to his body, or by employing any other cognitive capacity. The employment of such cognitive capacities can occur *as* he is in the midst of making such alterations, no doubt, but neither his activation of such capacities nor the capacities themselves *move his body* across the dance floor. *He* does this, by using what I am calling his faculty of will-power, which is distinct from the bodily and cognitive capacities the activation of which features in the basic bodily and mental actions that he performs. And even in mundane cases, the performance of a basic bodily action requires that the agent causally (a) *initiate*, (b) *sustain*, and (c) *control* the activation and employment of the relevant bodily capacities, however brief in duration this might be. When an agent does so, he does so by employing his will-power as *the means by which* he uses the capacities in question, the very same faculty that the agent suffering from paralysis employs in his attempt to perform a basic action. I shall return to this below.

In addition to the distinctive effort that is required to perform a basic bodily action, the performance of a basic mental action also requires effort on the part of the agent. Like that required in the performance of basic bodily actions, the effort is not obvious in every circumstance, but it is present nonetheless and its presence is especially manifested in cases of what I shall call *mental*



*paralysis* and *partial success*. Consider first the notion of mental paralysis.<sup>17</sup> In conditions of mental paralysis, effort can be manifested as such in the failure to bring about a basic mental action. For example, an agent afflicted with Alzheimer's disease suffers from the loss of the capacity to recollect information, and often suffers from an impairment of other cognitive capacities. In the later stages of the disease, many afflicted agents are no longer be able to remember facts concerning the past, as the disease will have eliminated the ability to do so. In such unfortunate and distressing circumstances, the agent will be paralyzed in the sense that the relevant capacity is no longer in working order, and so the agent can only fail to employ it, a failure that can be manifest in the lack of recall of the sought-for information. Crucially, in such situations, the agent is doing something, namely, exerting his will-power so as to activate a cognitive capacity, but he is not performing the basic mental action in question. In such cases there will be *some* kind of event occurring as he exerts effort so as to activate a cognitive capacity, something that occurs as a direct causal consequence of his exertion of effort in such strange circumstances.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of how we describe the details of the scenario, though, the point remains: by attempting but failing to perform a basic mental action in circumstances of this kind, the agent can come to the realization that he is exerting effort so as to activate his own cognitive capacities and perform the basic action in question.

As in the case of basic bodily action, we need not imagine such extraordinary circumstances in order to discover that effort is required in the performance of every basic mental action. For example, imagine an agent who is in the midst of attempting to determine the most appropriate

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<sup>17</sup> The cases that I have in mind, like the one that I shall introduce in the text above, are often called "dementia", rather than "mental paralysis".

<sup>18</sup> As mentioned above, since I think that will-power is essentially *causal*, in contrast to Lowe, I believe that an event will always occur in such cases of what I am calling mental paralysis. The event will not be the basic mental action that the agent is attempting to perform, but it is something that he is bringing about as a result of his effort in the conditions of mental paralysis.

move in a difficult game of chess, where the game is occurring in a noisy and busy café that offers many potential distractions, and who comes to realize that his attempt is only partially succeeding. In cases of this kind, the ability of the agent to attend to the most appropriate move is hindered by the presence of the events that surround him. His failure is not total, since he remains partially focused on the task at hand, but he is successful only in part in the attempt to determine the most appropriate move. In such conditions, the agent can adjust and correct the way in which he is thinking about the possible moves, in the attempt to attend more acutely on those that are available. In making the necessary adjustments, the agent must *control* his attention, as well as the ways in which he is employing the relevant cognitive capacity or capacities, however subtle this control might be, and he does not do so automatically but by *causing* this to occur. Crucially, the distinctive kind of causal control that the agent can exert over his cognitive capacities is *not* itself a mental action of any kind. The agent does not redirect or concentrate the focus of his attention, say, by entertaining a thought to that effect, or by choosing, deciding, or intending to do so, or by imagining the requisite alteration, or by remembering how to do so, or by employing any other cognitive capacity. The employment of such cognitive capacities can occur *as* he is in the midst of making such alterations, no doubt, but neither his activation of such capacities nor the capacities themselves *control the direction and focus of his attention, or the ways in which he employs his cognitive capacities* more generally. *He* does this, by using his faculty of will-power, which is distinct from the cognitive capacities the activation of which features in the basic mental actions that he performs with each. And even in mundane cases, the performance of a basic mental action requires that the agent causally (a) *initiate*, (b) *sustain*, and (c) *control* the activation and employment of the relevant cognitive capacities, however brief in duration this might be. When an agent does so, he does so by

employing his will-power as *the means by which* he activates and employs the capacities in question, the very same faculty that the agent suffering from mental paralysis employs in his attempt to perform a basic mental action.<sup>19</sup> I shall return to this below.

Consider next the contrast between the active and passive relations in which an agent can stand with his own bodily and cognitive capacities. The contrast is most obvious when comparing distinct scenarios in which the same type of bodily or cognitive capacity is activated but only in one such scenario is the capacity activated by the agent himself. For example, compare a situation in which an agent's leg twitches or spasms, with a situation in which the agent moves the very same leg in a superficially similar way. In the former situation, the agent stands in a distinctively passive relation with the relevant bodily capacities. Such cases can be described in this manner precisely because the agent does not activate the relevant capacities; the leg twitches or jerks without his doing anything. In contrast, in the latter situation, the agent stands in a distinctively active relation with those very same capacities, and we can describe the agent as *controlling* his leg as he moves it, however briefly or sporadically. Such cases can be described in this manner precisely because the agent stands in an active relation with the movement of his leg.

A similar point can be made in the case of cognitive capacities and their employment in mental actions. For example, compare a situation in which it suddenly occurs to an agent that he forgot something at home, with a situation in which he is trying to remember where he placed his keys. In the former situation, the agent stands in a distinctively passive relation with the capacities

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<sup>19</sup> Note that I am assuming that the faculty of will-power employed in the performance of both bodily and mental actions is numerically *identical*. This assumption can be challenged on the grounds that there might be two distinct faculties at work, one in the bodily case, and another in the mental case. See, for example, Brian O'Shaughnessy's remarks to that effect in his "Trying and Acting" in Lucy O'Brien and Matthew Soteriou, eds., *Mental Actions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 163-172. Regardless of whether or not there are two, numerically distinct faculties of will-power, though, the point here is to highlight the essential features that this *type* of faculty possesses, whether one or two in number.

that enable him to recall information. Here, the agent can be correctly described as coming to the *sudden realization* that he has forgotten something at home. Such cases can be described in this manner precisely because the agent stands in a passive relation with his capacities for recollection, which simply present the information to his awareness. In contrast, in the latter situation, the agent stands in a distinctively active relation with the capacities that enable him to recall certain pieces of information. Here, the agent can be correctly described as *trying* to remember where he placed his keys. Such cases can be described in this manner precisely because the agent stands in an active relation with his capacities for recollection, which are being used by him in an attempt to search for the information.

By now, I hope to have made a convincing case for the claim that, even in the performance of basic actions of either the bodily or mental kind, there is *something* that the agent does in order to bring those actions into being. In particular, I have claimed that the agent must exert effort in order to causally (a) initiate, (b) sustain, and (c) control the activation and employment of the relevant capacities, however brief in duration this might be. When doing so, the agent employs the faculty of will-power as the means by which the basic action in question is brought into being, and, crucially, his basic action is something that he *causes*. The effort in question and the means by which it is made possible is what goes missing in the accounts of agent causation offered by Chisholm, Taylor, and O'Connor. Before describing this alternative account of agent causation in more detail, we should consider the account of agent causation offered by Lowe, since the way in which he depicts the agent-causal relation acknowledges the difficulty that besets those already mentioned, and is most similar to that which will be defended here.

## 2.2. Lowe's Account of the Agent-Causal Relation

Recall that, according to Lowe, the agent-causal relation itself is not unique to the realm of human agency but is a species of substance causation. Lowe believes that it is only substances that possess causal powers and causal liabilities, and as such they are the only kind of entity that is capable of *doing* anything. On this view, agents, such as particular human beings, tables, chairs, coffee mugs and laptop computers, are individual substances that can persist through time and across various sorts of changes. In the specific context of human beings and the actions that they perform, says Lowe, when an agent causes an event to occur, he does so by *willing* to do so. The act of will is understood to be the act of choosing or deciding to do something, and it is the most basic action that an agent can perform. As such, it is a species of mental event that has an executive function and an intentional content that takes as its proper object a particular type of event. By willing to do such-and-so, says Lowe, the agent attempts to bring about an action-result, that is, an event that can be brought about by the agent or by some other means, such as when the agent's right arm moves in an upward direction. When such an event is brought about by the agent, it is an action that he performs; otherwise, it remains a mere action-result. Thus, for Lowe, the agent is a cause of his actions inasmuch as it is by *acting* in a particular way—by exercising his power of choice or decision—that the agent brings about the sought-for action-results, when all goes well in suitably normal conditions. The agent-causal relation is thus one that obtains between the agent's *basic mental act of choice or decision* and the subsequent *action-result*. This improves upon the accounts of agent causation offered by Chisholm, Taylor, and O'Connor because it insists that it is only *by doing*

*something*—by performing the mental act of choice or decision—that the agent is able to bring about the relevant action-results.

Crucially, for Lowe, when an act of will—the making of a choice or decision—is performed rationally, what occurs is an event that is not caused by anything and that does not exert any causal powers of its own. That is, when the agent exercises his power of choice or decision in light of his assessment of the reasons that support his doing so, his doing so is not caused by anything, neither by the agent himself nor by anything else, since its being caused would be *incompatible* with its being rational. It would be incompatible, says Lowe, because “causal processes bring about their effects with complete indifference to the question of whether those effects have cogent considerations in their favour”.<sup>20</sup> Thus, when an agent makes a choice or decision rationally, we must understand this action as the exercise of a spontaneous and uncaused power. In addition, when the spontaneous and uncaused power of choice or decision is exercised by the agent, this does not *by itself* bring about or cause an event. For according to Lowe, the act of will can fail to bring about the sought-for action-result. If the power of choice or decision were causal, says Lowe, then its use by the agent would *always* consist in the causing of the relevant event.<sup>21</sup>

Now, although Lowe’s account makes room for the idea that the agent plays an active role in the performance of his own actions, it employs an unduly restrictive notion of the will, and four problematic assumptions emerge as a result. The assumptions are as follows:

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<sup>20</sup> See his *op. cit.*, p. 156. The relevant passage is: “To act for a reason is to act in a way that is responsive to the cogency of certain considerations in favour of one’s so acting—and this is incompatible with one’s being *caused* to act in that way, because causal processes bring about their effects with complete indifference to the question of whether those effects have cogent considerations in their favour” (his italics).

<sup>21</sup> As he puts it, *ibid.* p. 150: “If the will were a causal power, it could not be exercised without a suitable effect *actually occurring*, any more than water’s power to cause sugar to dissolve can be exercised without some sugar *actually dissolving*. But I can, for example, exercise my will by willing to raise my arm even if my arm does not *actually rise* as a result of my so willing. Thus [concludes Lowe], an exercise of my will consists, in itself, *merely* in my willing to do something, *not* in my actually doing that thing as a consequence of my so willing” (his italics).

- First, it is limited to the kind of agent that is capable of choosing or deciding to do such-and-so in light of considerations that that agent deems to support his so doing. In this sense, his account of agent causation is *restricted* in its applicability to highly intelligent and rational agents.<sup>22</sup>
- Second, Lowe assumes that the will is *mental*, insofar as it is understood to enable the agent to choose or decide to perform a particular type of action, thereby limiting the applicability of the notion of will-power to only those agents that possess some form of mentality.
- Third, his account of the notion of an agent's rational and spontaneous exercise of will (the act of choice or decision) assumes that the will itself is *not causal*. In such circumstances, the exercise of will (the act of choice or decision) consists merely in the agent willing to do something, not in his so performing the relevant basic bodily or mental action as a consequence.
- Fourth and finally, Lowe's account assumes that the agent's rational and spontaneous employment of the will *does not require effort*, which precludes among other things the possibility that an agent might exert effort when making a choice or decision in particularly difficult or strenuous circumstances.

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<sup>22</sup> Two points are worth noting here: first, this criticism applies to O'Connor's account of agent causation as well, but I shall not elaborate that point here; second, this criticism is one that Lowe would likely accept on the grounds that his account of agent causation is coupled with a defence of a "libertarian" notion of free and rational action that is not intended to apply to non-rational agents.

Let's examine each assumption. The first and second assumptions are related and problematic for essentially the same reason: without argumentation, they limit the applicability of the notion of the will to those kinds of highly intelligent and rational agents that are capable of performing the mental act of choice or decision, and who thus possess some form of mentality. In contrast, the account of will-power sketched thus far is not limited to agents of that kind. The account is meant to explain *self-generated action* of either the bodily or mental type, whether or not such action is performed intelligently and rationally. Thus, it applies to relatively simple-minded agents who appear to possess severely limited rational and cognitive capacities and who can nevertheless exert the kind of effort that is distinctive of the faculty of will-power in order to move their bodies within their environment. For example, in the attempt to find its own form of nourishment, the lowly earthworm must burrow its own body through damp soil by contracting and relaxing its many muscles. Although its sophistication pales in comparison to many other agents, the earthworm is nevertheless capable of performing a kind of self-generated action. In doing so, the earthworm must exert effort in order to move its body throughout the soil, since its characteristic yet minimal form of bodily action is neither automated nor controlled by external forces. The effort required for such self-generated action is a paradigmatic instance of the very same kind of effort that even highly intelligent and rational agents must exert when activating their own bodily and cognitive capacities. A proper explanation of action should not assume that the agent in question possesses a sophisticated form of mentality.

The third assumption is problematic for a different reason. Recall that Lowe believes that when an act of will is performed rationally and spontaneously it is not causal, that in and of itself it possesses no causal powers whatsoever. His argument for this claim is simply that an agent can will



such-and-so to occur but *fail* to bring that action into being. If the faculty of will-power were causal, says Lowe, then its use by the agent would *always* consist in the causing of the relevant action. The problem here is that the possibility of failure *by itself* does not establish that the will is not a causal power. For example, in conditions of bodily paralysis, although the agent fails to bring about the sought-for bodily action, it does not follow that the agent cannot thereby bring about a *different* event, perhaps one confined within his own central nervous system or brain. In such non-standard cases, the faculty of will-power can remain causal while the normal means by which it operates within the body are damaged or destroyed, and the agent's employment thereof can cause or create an event that is not the action the agent is attempting to perform. In order to establish that will-power is not causal, Lowe must demonstrate that this alternative is either impossible or very highly unlikely, neither of which he has done.

The difficulty with the fourth and final assumption is related to that faced by the accounts of agent causation offered by Chisholm, Taylor, and O'Connor. Although *pace* Chisholm, Taylor, and O'Connor, Lowe is correct to claim that it is only *by doing something* that an agent is able to perform a basic action of either the bodily or mental kind, his account of agent causation falters. It falters because in explaining the notion of an act of will—the power of choice or decision—in the context of its rational and spontaneous employment, Lowe is forced to say that (1) the cognitive capacities employed in making a choice or decision and (2) the agent's use of such capacities are not to be understood causally. This is problematic for two related reasons. The first problem is that the act of making a choice or decision can require effort. Some decisions, after all, are difficult to make, even extremely so. For example, it is possible for an agent to deliberate about the considerations that count in favor of and against making a particular decision, to come to an evaluation that sides in

favor of making the decision in question, and to nevertheless encounter some form of resistance prior to deciding in that way. In such cases, in order to overcome the resistance to making that decision, the agent will have to exert a distinctive kind of effort in order to employ his capacity to make a decision. The effort is required to *causally activate* the relevant capacity in the act of making the decision in the context of resistance. Thus, it is not the case that every rational act of choice or decision can be understood to occur spontaneously and without cause, even when performed in the light of reason, as Lowe understands that notion.

The second problem is that in claiming that the rational act of choice or decision is spontaneous and without cause, Lowe must account for the difference between cases in which the capacity for choice activates spontaneously yet *without* the agent's involvement, on the one hand, and cases in which the capacity for choice activates spontaneously yet *at the behest of* the agent, on the other. If Lowe is correct, both activations of the capacity occur can spontaneously and without cause, but only the latter manner of activation involves the agent in the performance of a mental action. How do we capture the difference between cases where the capacity activates itself spontaneously and without cause, and cases where the capacity activates itself spontaneously and without cause but is employed by the agent in the act of making a decision? It seems that Lowe must say that although the manner of activation of the capacity is the same in both cases—spontaneous and without cause—the evaluative or normative *context* in which the activation occurs is importantly different, for only in the latter case does the activation of the capacity occur rationally, in the light of the agent's assessment of the considerations that count in favor of his doing so. But from the perspective of the agent, there is no difference between his capacity for choice activating spontaneously and without cause in light of reason, and his capacity for choice activating

spontaneously and without cause *simpliciter*. In both situations, the capacity for choice simply activates spontaneously and without cause. There is nothing that the agent *does* so as to activate the relevant capacity, even in cases where its activation occurs rationally, in the light of the agent's assessment of the considerations that support his so doing. The activation of the capacity for choice seems to be entirely beyond the reach of his control. Thus, in spite of Lowe's belief to the contrary, at the heart of his account of agent causation, the agent remains *passive*.

Given these difficulties, I think we can move beyond Lowe's unduly restrictive notion of the will. Once we do, we can also extend the applicability of the alternative notion of will-power that has been introduced thus far and its relation to that of basic action. Recall the examples of paralysis and partial success introduced above, and the distinction between the active and passive relations in which an agent can stand with his own bodily and cognitive capacities. Their point was to make plausible the idea that an agent must exert a distinctive kind of effort in order to perform even a simple, basic action of either the bodily or mental type. In particular, the claim was that, even in mundane cases, the performance of a basic action requires that the agent causally (a) initiate, (b) sustain, and (c) control the activation of the relevant capacities, however easy or brief in duration this might be, and that the faculty of will-power is the means by which the agent is able to do so. In addition, there are circumstances in which the act of making a choice or decision requires effort on the part of the agent. Crucially, I suggest, the kind of effort that is required in mundane cases of action and extraordinary ones is *identical*, though varied in its strength or intensity, and the faculty of will-power is the means by which the agent is able to exert such effort.

### 2.3. *Will-Power, the Agent-Causal Relation, and Agent Causation*

The alternative account of agent causation that has been described thus far employs a notion of will-power that has seven interrelated features. It is worth explicitly stating these features and spelling out their connection to this account of agent causation, and then responding to two objections that might be raised against it. The sixth and seventh features will be set aside for the remainder of this chapter and considered again in chapters two and three, respectively. The main features are as follows:

1. The faculty of will-power *enables* the agent to causally activate his bodily and cognitive capacities during the performance of bodily and mental actions. In abnormal circumstances, such as that of paralysis, the usual means by which such activation occurs is damaged or destroyed, thereby altering or eliminating the usual manner in which the agent is able to activate the relevant capacity or capacities, but the faculty of will-power itself remains undamaged.
  
2. The faculty of will-power is postulated as the *medium* through which the agent is causally related to his own bodily and cognitive capacities, an assumption that helps to explain (a) the distinction between the active and passive relations in which the agent can stand with those capacities and (b) cases of paralysis in which the agent tries but fails to employ a capacity. The relation in which the agent stands to the faculty of will-power is not mediated in that kind of way.

3. The agent's bodily and cognitive capacities can be activated by the agent *or* by other factors.

When the capacities are activated by the agent, an action occurs; otherwise, a superficially similar non-action event occurs. An event is a basic action only when brought about in the agent-causal way; that is, the activation of the relevant capacity or capacities is a basic action only if it has been initiated by the agent through his use of will-power.

4. The faculty is *causal*. In standard cases, the agent's use of will-power causes the activation of the relevant bodily and cognitive capacities, and its continued use by the agent over an extended period of time enables the agent to sustain and control the relevant capacities during the ongoing performance of an action. In non-standard cases, such as paralysis, the causal force of will-power deviates from the normal means by which it operates, causing an event that is not the action the agent is attempting to perform.

5. The faculty is *distinct* inasmuch as it is neither a bodily nor a cognitive capacity. The effort required to initiate, sustain, and control the use of a bodily capacity, like that when walking up a steep hill or lifting and holding a heavy object, is not itself a bodily capacity; likewise, the effort required to initiate, sustain, and control the use of a cognitive capacity, like that when performing a difficult mathematical calculation or maintaining the focus of one's attention on a conversation that is taking place in a noisy room, is not itself a cognitive capacity. The effort is a distinctive feature of the faculty of will-power, not of the bodily and cognitive capacities that the faculty enables the agent to activate.

6. In the case of many human agents and other highly intelligent and rational creatures, an agent can employ the faculty of will-power in activating his bodily and cognitive capacities *in light of* his assessment of the considerations that support his so doing. That is, the bodily and mental actions that the agent performs can be assessed as more or less reasonable, rational, or intelligible, either in a general sense or in the specific context in which they occur. When acting in light of such an assessment, the agent's assessment, as well as any other potential motivational factor like a belief, desire, decision, intention, mood, etc., does *not* cause the activation of the relevant bodily or cognitive capacities.
  
7. The faculty is not *merely* active or inactive. It can be strengthened or weakened, and the intensity with which it is used can be increased or diminished. For example, when an agent adheres to the dictates of a resolution or prior decision in the face of a compelling urge to the contrary, he must exert a distinctive kind of effort in overcoming the force of the urge, effort that is explained by the presence and relative strength of the faculty of will-power.

Let's consider the first five features in more detail. As it has thus far been described, the faculty of will-power has a specific function, namely, that of enabling the agent to causally initiate, sustain, and control his own bodily and cognitive capacities in the performance of a self-generated action. When performing such an action, the agent employs the faculty of will-power by exerting a distinctive kind of effort, an exertion on the part of the agent that is inherently or essentially active. The exertion of such effort is what distinguishes the active and passive relations in which an agent can stand with his capacities, and is what is present when an agent tries but fails to perform an action in cases of bodily

and mental paralysis. Crucially, since the faculty of will-power is a causal power, the exertion of effort by the agent always brings about some event or other, both in cases of successful action and in paralysis of either the bodily or mental type. And since neither the agent nor the faculty of will-power is an event of any kind, the causal relation that obtains between them is not one between distinct events, and the agent's exertion of effort in the use of will-power is not itself an independent or isolated event of any kind. Rather, the causal relation is one of the *manifestation of a disposition* that has a characteristic range of effects, like that of tap water when dissolving table salt, or that of a magnet when attracting particular kinds of metals, or that of the spontaneous radioactive decay of an atomic nucleus.<sup>23</sup> Equally as crucially, the faculty of will-power can be employed by the agent so as to causally initiate, sustain, and control various capacities in the performance of either bodily or mental actions, but the faculty itself is neither a bodily nor a cognitive capacity. It is not a bodily or cognitive capacity because (1) its manifestation has a unique range of characteristic effects that differ in kind from that of bodily and cognitive capacities, and (2) unlike bodily and cognitive capacities, the faculty of will-power cannot be made manifest by anything or anyone other than the agent. That is to say, although bodily and cognitive capacities are understood as dispositions the activations of which have characteristic effects, their effects are different in kind from each other and also from that of the faculty of will-power itself. Roughly put, in the case of bodily capacities, their activation consists in the distinctive movements of particular bodily parts, such as when an agent moves his legs as he walks or turns his head in the direction of a sound; in the case of cognitive capacities, their activation consists in representational content coming to mind in a capacity-specific way, such as when a trumpet-like sound comes to mind in the process of imagining a solo by Louis Armstrong, or

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<sup>23</sup> For a useful account of the notions of a disposition and causal power, see George Molnar, *Powers: A Study in Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

when a thought comes to mind in the process of recalling a fact about the past.<sup>24</sup> Both types of capacity can be activated by the agent or by factors that are external to the agent. When such a capacity is activated by the agent through his use of will-power, an action occurs; when such a capacity is activated by someone or something other than the agent, a superficially similar non-action event occurs. When the faculty of will-power is employed by the agent *in the performance of an action*, its manifestation causes the initiation of the relevant bodily or cognitive capacity or capacities; when the faculty of will-power is activated by the agent *in conditions of paralysis or failure of some kind*, its manifestation causes an event of some kind or other that is not the action in question.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well, the range of characteristic effects of the employment of will-power by the agent consist in the performance of an action of the bodily or mental type, which is itself the initiation of bodily or cognitive capacities by the agent and their sustained activation over time as the agent controls the relevant capacities. In abnormal conditions and when all does not go well, the employment of will-power by the agent initiates the onset of a non-action event of the bodily or mental type, which need not be the activation of a bodily or mental capacity by the agent.

As described so far, when performing a self-generated action, the agent employs the faculty of will-power by exerting a distinctive kind of effort that is active but not an independent or isolable event, and which distinguishes the active and passive relations in which an agent can stand with his

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<sup>24</sup> I take no stand here on the nature of “representational content”, i.e., whether it is to be understood “externally” or “internally” or through some combination thereof, and I take the idea of such content “coming to mind” to be explicable through examples. The sense in which such content comes to mind in a capacity-specific way just is the relevant differences between, say, the ways in which imagination and memory present something to mind.

<sup>25</sup> The view described here is akin to so-called “highest common factor” notions of perceptual experience, since cases in which an agent successfully performs an action and cases of paralysis and partial success share a common element, viz., the exertion of effort on the part of the agent. Put slightly differently, effort is not only involved in cases of paralysis and partial success, but also in cases of success. I thank Taylor Carman for raising this point during discussion.



capacities, and is what is present when an agent tries but fails to perform an action in cases of bodily and mental paralysis. Crucially, such effort is something that the agent does or exerts, and it is thus something that we attribute directly *to him*. For example, when lifting and holding a heavy object over an extended period of time, the agent's muscles might shudder and his joints might hurt as he struggles, but the effort required for sustaining and controlling the activation of the relevant capacities does not belong to his muscles and joints or the bodily capacities used in the performance of that action. No doubt, in such cases there will be physical limitations imposed upon the agent by, for example, the strength of his muscles, or the flexibility of his joints and tendons, or the density of his bones. But such limitations are distinct from those imposed by the agent's will-power, as is manifest in those albeit rare cases where an agent *forces* himself to perform a particular bodily action to the point at which his muscles, joints, tendons, bones, etc., are damaged or broken. The effort in question belongs to him – it is something that he exerts or does as he continues to hold the heavy object, but it is not the action in question. Likewise, in concentrating on a challenging task while in a noisy and busy café, the agent's ability to remain focused might be threatened by potential distractions, and the effort required to remain resolute in his performance of the task does not belong to the cognitive capacities used in the performance of that action. Here too, as in the physical limitations imposed by the agent's body, there will be cognitive limitations imposed upon the agent by, for example, factors such as whether or not the agent suffers from a disorder that often hinders his ability to concentrate, or his felt urge to give up the task at hand, or his belief that doing so is not mandatory. But such limitations are distinct from those imposed by the agent's will-power, as is manifest in cases where the agent *forces* himself to continue in the performance of the mental action in question. The effort in question belongs to him – it is something that he exerts or does as

he continues to remain focused upon his task, but it is not the action in question. Thus, in the performance of bodily and mental actions alike, the effort required to causally initiate, sustain, and control the relevant capacities is attributed to the agent, and the causal efficacy of effort is a function not of the agent's body or mind, but of the distinct faculty of will-power.

Now, there are two related objections that one might have to the alternative account of agent causation described thus far. Providing a response to each will help to clarify what has been said.<sup>26</sup> The first objection is this: any account of agent causation that attempts to secure room for the idea that the agent himself can play an essential causal role in the production of self-generated actions appears to be committed to a dubious form of non-naturalism. Naturalism is here understood very generally, to be a way of understanding agents that is amenable to the burgeoning picture of the world as depicted by the natural sciences. That picture is one in which the agent is understood to be wholly physical, in some sense of "physical" that rules out the possibility of any controversial forms of mind-body dualism that deny the causal closure of the physical domain, and in which causation is understood as a relation between distinct events the interactions of which are governed by laws of nature, whether deterministic or statistical. Given this notion of naturalism, non-naturalism is simply the *denial* that the agent can be understood to be wholly physical and that the physical domain is causally closed in any robust manner, and that every instance of causation must be understood as a relation between distinct events the interactions of which are governed by laws of nature, whether deterministic or statistical.

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<sup>26</sup> For a recent statement of these objections, see Jesús H. Aguilar and Andrei A. Buckareff, "Agency, Consciousness, and Executive Control" in *Philosophia*, Volume 37, Number 1, March 2009, pp. 21-30. Both objections can be leveled at the account of agent causation defended by Lowe in particular, since he explicitly rejects the causal closure of the physical domain and employs a notion of substance causation.

The second, related objection is this: since the notion of agent causation requires that the agent is capable of playing a unique kind of causal role in the production and performance of his own actions, the defender of agent causation must introduce a notion of causation that is simply mysterious (e.g., substance causation). Unless the defender of agent causation can supply grounds for believing that this notion of causation is neither mysterious nor implausible on its own terms, the notion that the agent *himself* can play an essential causal role in the production of self-generated actions must be understood as misguided shorthand for the idea that some proper part(s) of or event(s) within the agent perform all of the necessary causal work.

The account of agent causation depicted thus far is not committed to a dubious form of non-naturalism or a mysterious notion of causation. However, the account is committed to the idea that the agent and the faculty of will-power are related in a unique way that differs from the relation between the agent and his bodily and cognitive capacities, and to a notion of “immanent causation”, of which the agent-causal relation is an instance. Both notions are controversial, but they neither require nor entail a dubious form of non-naturalism, nor do they involve a mysterious notion of causation. To see why, consider first the very idea of an action. The notion of an action is not uncontroversial, but it can be specified in at least two different ways: first, by contrasting actions with *events*, and second, by contrasting actions with *merely reflexive behavior*. Consider first the contrast between actions and events. Actions can be understood as a subset of the wider category of an event. Events are particular, dateable occurrences that have a beginning, middle, and end point in time and that involve change of some kind. Thus, actions must take place over a period of time, however brief, and involve some kind of change, however minimal. A crucial difference between actions and events concerns the ways in which actions are *intelligible*. Characteristically though not

necessarily, actions can be understood and evaluated in terms of the ways in which they realize some larger purpose or goal.<sup>27</sup> Actions that realize a goal in an effective manner can be deemed rational in this sense, whereas actions that fail to realize a goal, or that do so in an ineffective manner, can be deemed irrational. Events are not intelligible in this sense, and so they cannot be understood and evaluated in terms of the ways in which they realize some larger purpose or goal.<sup>28</sup> Call this “the intelligibility condition” for action.

Consider next the contrast between actions and merely reflexive behavior. Here, actions can be understood as the *doings* of an agent, whereas merely reflexive behavior cannot. In this sense, actions are performative, they are changes that occur because they are things that agents *do*, whereas merely reflexive behavior is not performative, but is a kind of change that *happens to* the agent. Crucially and necessarily, an action is brought about in some special way by the agent that performs it, so that the performance of an action can be understood to have a unique kind of *cause* that is lacking in the case of merely reflexive behavior. Given this way of understanding action, whether a particular event realizes some larger purpose or goal, or whether it does so in an effective or ineffective manner, does not determine whether it is an action; all that matters is that the event in question is a performance or doing of an agent that has been caused in the relevant manner. Call this “the causal condition” for action.

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<sup>27</sup> I say “characteristically though not necessarily” so as to make room for actions that are not performed so as to realize some larger purpose or goal and that are thus performed for no reason in particular. Examples might include tapping one’s foot so as to relieve nervous tension. Here, tapping one’s foot need not realize the purpose or goal of relieving tension in the sense that the agent is not tapping his foot *so as to* do just that, although it might very well do so incidentally or as a matter of habit.

<sup>28</sup> Given this contrast between actions and events, if an event can be understood and evaluated in terms of the ways in which it realizes some larger purpose or goal, then that provides *prima facie* support in favor of the claim that the event is in fact an action. For example, if an academic lecture can be evaluated in terms of the way in which it realizes the larger purpose or goal of providing information to a large number of people, then the lecture itself is in fact an action.

Now, given both notions of action, what can be said of the characteristic effort that an agent must exert when causally initiating, sustaining, and controlling the relevant bodily and cognitive capacities in the performance of an action? Is this effortful exertion on the part of the agent itself an action? It seems to satisfy both the intelligibility and causal conditions: the agent's employment of his will-power has a beginning, middle, and end point in time, involves a change of some kind, and it can be understood and evaluated in terms of the realization of a larger purpose or goal; and it is an active doing or performance on the part of the agent that is the manifestation of a causal power and a subsequent result, either the initiation of the relevant capacity or capacities in the performance of an action, or the initiation of a non-action event in cases of failure or paralysis.

The key difference, though, is that the effort that is the employment of will-power, although intelligible as the realization of a goal and as an active performance by the agent, cannot be *isolated* as an independent event. That is, it does not stand alone or distinct but is internal to the agent himself. This is a form of "immanent causation", where the cause and effect are attributed to the very same agent, and where the causal relation is understood as the self-triggering of a one-sided or unilateral disposition that is made manifest by the agent without the participation of anything or anyone else, like that of a magnet when attracting particular kinds of metals, or that of the spontaneous radioactive decay of an atomic nucleus.<sup>29</sup> It is thus no more or less mysterious than other such instances of causation and so the second objection mentioned above does not apply.

The alternative account of agent causation described thus far requires that the agent and his faculty of will-power are not distinct entities, whereas the agent and his bodily and cognitive

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<sup>29</sup> The contrasting form of causation is often called "transient causation", where the cause and the effect are attributed to distinct agents, entities, or events. For an excellent discussion of both notions of causation, see Neil E. Williams, *The Power to Persist* (Columbia University Doctoral Dissertation, 2005), especially pp. 415-442. The historic roots of both notions can be found in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

capacities are distinct. That is to say, the faculty of will-power is *internal* to the agent in a unique manner. The sense in which will-power is internal to the agent is understood in terms of *accessibility* and *use*. Like experience, which is internal to an agent in the sense that he alone is able to enjoy its many fruits, the faculty of will-power can be accessed and used only by the agent himself. His access to it is immediate and direct: through exerting effort, he employs its causal powers, regardless of what happens as a consequence thereof. In contrast, the bodily and cognitive capacities that the agent activates in the performance of an action are distinct features of the agent. The sense in which such capacities are distinct from the agent is likewise understood in terms of accessibility and use. Unlike the faculty of will-power, the agent's bodily and cognitive capacities can be accessed and used by external factors or forces. His access to and use of his own bodily and cognitive capacities is thus mediated and indirect.

Moreover, to say that the agent and his faculty of will-power are not distinct is to say that the agent *cannot exist* as the *kind* of entity that he is without having or possessing that faculty. Thus, the agent has or possesses a faculty of will-power in a fundamentally different kind of way from the way in which he has or possesses bodily and cognitive capacities. In the case of his bodily and cognitive capacities, they can be damaged or destroyed without thereby altering his status as an agent. In the case of the faculty of will-power, it cannot be damaged or destroyed without thereby altering his status as an agent. The upshot is that the agent retains his identity *as an agent* only while he continues to possess a faculty of will-power, though he can continue to exist as that kind of entity through the destruction or removal of one or more of his bodily or cognitive capacities. The faculty of will-power is thus *essential* to his continued status as an agent.

Crucially, this account of agent causation is neither committed to nor entails a dubious form of non-naturalism, as that notion was introduced above. It is not committed to a controversial form of mind-body dualism that denies the causal closure of the physical domain, and although the notion of immanent causation that figures therein is committed to the claim that at least some causal relations can be understood as the self-triggering of a unilateral disposition by the agent, by itself this is not to deny that such events can be governed by laws of nature, whether deterministic or statistical. The account is committed to the claim that bodily and cognitive capacities are distinct in *type*, insofar as their respective activations consists in different kinds of characteristic effects – the movements of corresponding bodily parts, on one hand, and representational content coming to mind in a capacity-specific manner, on the other. But by itself this commitment does not require or entail any dubious form of non-naturalism or mind-body dualism.

As we have seen, the core idea of the account of agent causation described thus far is that when an agent activates his own bodily and cognitive capacities, a self-generated action occurs. The agent activates his own capacities by means of the faculty of will-power, the use of which situates him in a distinctively active relation with his own capacities. When all goes well in suitably normal conditions, the agent-causal relation obtains between the agent and his own bodily and cognitive capacities, mediated by the faculty of will-power as among the necessary conditions which enable him to initiate, sustain, and control the relevant capacities in the performance of a basic action. In contrast with the accounts offered by Chisholm, Taylor, O'Connor, and Lowe the notion of agent causation developed here explains the distinctively active role of the agent in the production and performance of his own bodily and mental actions in terms of his use of the faculty of will-power. The distinction between cases in which a bodily or cognitive capacity has been activated by the

agent, on the one hand, and cases in which the very same capacity has been activated by someone or something other than the agent, on the other, is that only in the former kind of situation has the agent used his faculty of will-power in the *effort* to do just that. Thus, on the alternative account of agent causation depicted so far, the agent-causal relation is *not direct*, but is mediated by the faculty of will-power as the means by which the agent activates his own capacities in the performance of an action of either the basic or non-basic type. And in contrast with the account of agent causation offered by Lowe in particular, the faculty of will-power is here understood to be neither bodily nor mental but unique in its own right, and essentially causal in its operation.

### 3. *Concluding Remarks and Looking Ahead*

In this chapter, I have presented an account of the notion of agent causation that builds upon the strengths and avoids the weaknesses of four previous accounts. In doing so, I have attempted to motivate the idea that the agent plays an active role in his performance of basic bodily and mental actions by employing the faculty of will-power as the means by which he causally initiates, sustains, and controls the activation of his own bodily and cognitive capacities. The agent-causal relation is understood to be indirect, as evinced by the kind of effort involved in cases of paralysis and the correction of partially successful actions, and the distinction between the active and passive relations in which an agent can stand with his own bodily and cognitive capacities.

In the next chapter, I aim to accomplish two things. First, I will criticize what has come to be known as “the standard story” of action, a story whose contemporary versions originate in the work of Donald Davidson and subsequent modifications suggested by Michael Bratman and J.



David Velleman.<sup>30</sup> I will argue that the standard story fails as an account of bodily action on the grounds that it cannot explain cases where an agent displays strength of will, such as when overcoming a persistent and forceful motivational factor that threatens to undermine the action that he is in the midst of performing. I will claim that the standard story cannot explain strength of will because it does not acknowledge the possibility that the agent can exert effort when employing the relevant bodily capacities during his struggle to overcome the force of the relevant motivational factor, an exertion that cannot be reduced to or explained in terms of the sorts of motivational factors that figure within the standard story. My second aim will be to address what is known as “Davidson’s Challenge”, by arguing that in order to understand why an agent performed an action in light of one particular motivational factor rather than another, we need not assume that the relevant motivational factor be understood to *cause* the agent’s performance of the action that it makes intelligible. Rather, I shall suggest that we can explain the fact in virtue of which it is true that an agent performed a bodily action in light of one set of motivational factors rather than another in terms of the agent’s deliberation and subsequent understanding of the factors at play.

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<sup>30</sup> The expression “the standard story” was introduced by J. David Velleman in his paper “What Happens When Someone Acts?” originally published in *Mind*, Volume 101, Number 403, July 1992, pp. 461-481.

## *Chapter Two*

### *Against the Standard Story of Action*

The standard story of action occupies a prominent place in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of mind and action. The story concerns the metaphysics of action and seeks to spell out those conditions that an event must satisfy in order to be a bodily action performed by an agent. According to the standard story, bodily actions are events that are caused by and made intelligible through the appropriate interactions between the agent's motivational factors, including his beliefs, desires, and intentions. The story is thus an event-causal account of bodily action, insofar as a particular action is understood to be a discrete event that is caused in the appropriate way by the onset of the motivational factors that render that action intelligible, where the onset of the relevant motivational factors within the agent is an event that stands in the appropriate causal relation with the bodily movements that comprise the action in question.

My goal in this chapter is to argue that the standard story fails as an account of bodily action. My argument against the standard story is twofold. First, I claim that the standard story and its subsequent modifications fail to explain situations in which an agent displays what I shall describe as "strength of will". An agent displays strength of will when he overcomes a persistent and forceful motivational factor that threatens to undermine a previous intention and the action that it makes intelligible. As I hope to show, strength of will cannot be explained by the standard story and so it must be deemed inadequate. Second, I argue that in order to understand why an agent performed a particular action in light of one set of motivational factors rather than another, we need not *require* that the relevant motivational factors cause the agent's performance thereof. Instead, we can explain

what occurs in terms of the agent's deliberation and subsequent understanding of the motivational factors at play.

### 1. *The Standard Story of Action*

In contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of mind and action, Donald Davidson is often credited to be the source of the standard story.<sup>31</sup> According to Davidson, when we explain an action, we cite the agent's reason for doing so, and such explanations can be called "rationalizations". When we rationalize an action, we are lead to understand what it was about the action that appealed to the agent. Whenever an agent performs an action for a reason, says Davidson, he can be described as (1) having a pro-attitude towards actions of a particular kind and (b) as believing that the action in question is of that kind.<sup>32</sup> Together, the pro-attitude and the related belief is the "primary reason" why the agent performed the action in question (henceforth referred to as a "reason"<sup>33</sup>). Davidson thinks that in light of such a reason, an action can be revealed "as coherent with certain traits, long-

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<sup>31</sup> See his *Essays on Actions and Events*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), especially essays 1 through 5.

<sup>32</sup> There are two qualifications that Davidson mentions here: first, the notion of a pro-attitude includes "desires, wantings, urges, promptings, and a great variety of moral views, aesthetic principles, economic prejudices, social conventions and public and private goals and values in so far as these can be interpreted as attitudes of an agent directed toward actions of a certain kind" (*ibid.* p.4); second, the agent need not merely believe that the action in question is of that kind, but might also know, perceive, notice, or remember that it is so.

<sup>33</sup> A note about terminology: I shall speak of the agent's "motivational factors" broadly construed so as to include beliefs, desires, intentions, decisions, perceptual experiences, moods, etc., and shall use the terms to refer to the relevant mental events the onset of which play the requisite explanatory and causal roles in the production of bodily action according to proponents of the standard story.

or short-termed, characteristic or not, of the agent” so that the agent is “shown in his role of Rational Animal”.<sup>34</sup> Davidson’s aim is to defend the claim that the reason for an action is its *cause*.

Why should we think that a reason is the cause of the action that it rationalizes? The main argument that Davidson presents in defence of this claim is indirect, occurring by way of his criticisms of non-causal accounts of the role of reasons in the production of action. His argument is this: if we think that the reason for an action is not among its causes, then something essential seems to be omitted from our explanation, since “a person can have a reason for an action, and perform the action, and yet this reason not be the reason why he did it. Central to the relation between a reason and an action it explains is the idea that the agent performed the action *because* he had the reason. Of course, we can include this idea too in justification; but then the notion of justification becomes as dark as the notion of reason until we can account for the force of that ‘because’”.<sup>35</sup> The idea here is that it seems possible for an agent to have two or more reasons for performing an action even though the agent’s performance thereof occurs only by way of one such reason. According to Davidson, the fact that the agent performs the action for one reason rather than the other is best explained by claiming that the relevant reason is the one which caused the agent’s performance of that action, thereby enabling us to exclude the other reason on the grounds that it did not exert the relevant causal force in bringing about the action in question. The upshot, says Davidson, is that if we deny that reasons play this causal role in the production of an agent’s action, we have no way of explaining the fact that the agent performs the action for one reason rather than the other. I shall return to this in §5 below.

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<sup>34</sup> See *ibid.* p. 8. It is crucial to note that Davidson is interested in those of the agent’s motivational factors that rationalize the action in question according to *the agent’s own assessment* of the merits of doing so.

<sup>35</sup> See *ibid.* p. 9. In fact, this claim has been labeled “Davidson’s Challenge”. See, for example, Alfred Mele’s *Motivation and Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 38.

## 2. *Two Problems for the Standard Story: Deviance and Absence*

If we assume for now that Davidson has provided a *prima facie* justification for thinking that such reasons are best understood to make intelligible and cause the agent's performance of the relevant action, two important and related problems remain for the standard story. The first problem is that of deviant causal chains.<sup>36</sup> Consider Davidson's well-known example of the nervous climber: "A climber might want to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and he might know that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. This belief and want might so unnerve him as to cause him to loosen his hold."<sup>37</sup> The problem is that of specifying the conditions under which the relevant reason causes the agent's performance of the bodily movement *in the right way*. In the example, it seems clear that, although a reason is present in the form of the agent's wanting to rid himself of the weight and danger together with his belief about how he might go about doing so, his loosening his hold on the rope is caused not by the presence of the reason, but by his intervening state of nervousness. Thus, we need to specify the conditions under which the relevant reason causes the agent's performance of the relevant bodily movement in the right manner.

The second problem is that of the absent agent.<sup>38</sup> The challenge is that of ensuring that the agent who performs an action is involved in his performance thereof *in the right way*. Given that the

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<sup>36</sup> For example, see Roderick Chisholm's "The Descriptive Element in the Concept of Action" in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 61, Issue 20, October 1964, pp. 613-625, and Christopher Peacocke's "Deviant Causal Chains" in *Midwest Studies In Philosophy*, Volume 4, Issue 1, September 1979, pp. 123-155.

<sup>37</sup> See *op. cit.* p. 79, essay 4, entitled "Freedom to Act" originally published in Ted Honderich, ed., *Essays on Freedom of Action* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

<sup>38</sup> For an early statement of this worry, see Abraham I. Melden's *Free Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), esp. pp. 128-129.

standard story of action depicts actions as events that are caused in the right manner not by the agent himself but by the presence of the relevant reason, we must ensure that the agent is nevertheless able to exert control over his own actions. There are two distinct ways in which this worry can be expressed. The first is that the agent seems to be a *passive* participant in his own actions.<sup>39</sup> Here, the agent is involved in his own action but only in a very minimal and indirect manner, functioning like a helpless bystander who merely witnesses the events that surround him, unable to influence the causal relations between the relevant events. The second expression of this worry is more forceful.<sup>40</sup> The claim is not that the standard story depicts the agent as a passive bystander who enjoys only a minimal and indirect involvement with his own actions, but that the agent is *entirely absent*. The agent is absent in the sense that he is unable to produce or exert any kind of control over his own actions, since in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well *all* of the relevant causal force is attributed to the reason that makes intelligible and causes his performance of the relevant action. In such conditions, the agent is at best like a puppet whose bodily actions are produced and controlled by the relevant reason.

Proponents of the standard story have attempted to respond to the problem of deviance in a variety of different ways but there is yet no response that is generally accepted as correct.<sup>41</sup> For our

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<sup>39</sup> This way of expressing the worry was raised by J. David Velleman in his paper “What Happens When Someone Acts?” originally published in *Mind*, Volume 101, Issue 403, July 1992, pp. 461-481, and reprinted in his *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> This way of expressing the worry was raised by Jennifer Hornsby in her paper “Agency and Actions” published in John Hyman and Helen Steward, eds., *Agency and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1-23.

<sup>41</sup> The literature responding to the problem of deviance is vast. Influential responses include, for example, John Bishop’s *Natural Agency: An Essay on the Causal Theory of Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Berent Enç’s *How We Act: Causes, Reasons, and Intentions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), Alfred Mele’s *Springs of Action: Understanding Intentional Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and George M. Wilson’s *The Intentionality of Human Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989). For the claim that no response to the problem is generally accepted as correct see, for example, Sarah K. Paul’s “Deviant Formal Causation” in *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy*, Volume 5, Number 3, April 2011, p. 4.

purposes here, the problem of the absent agent, as well as two recent responses to it, will be our concern. It will be our concern because even if the standard story is successfully modified so as to solve the problem of deviance, the defenders of the standard story must nevertheless solve it in a way which ensures that the agent who performs an action in non-deviant circumstances exerts the right kind of control over his performance of the action in question. That is, even if the standard story can solve the problem of deviance, it must do so in way that properly accounts for the relation that the agent bears to his own body and bodily movements when initiating and sustaining the performance of basic and non-basic bodily actions, in contrast to the relation that the agent has with the movements of his own body when they occur without or in spite of his involvement therein.<sup>42</sup>

### 3. *Responses to the Problem of Absence*

There are two important lines of response that correspond to the two distinct ways of expressing the problem of the absent agent mentioned above. The first line of response has been inspired by the influential work of Harry Frankfurt.<sup>43</sup> The key claim is that the standard story can be modified so as to include an additional motivational factor, namely, the agent's *endorsement* of the reason that plays the relevant causal role in generating his performance of the action in question. When an agent

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<sup>42</sup> Harry Frankfurt puts the point rather well: “[D]uring the time a person is performing an action he is necessarily in touch with the movements of his body in a certain way, whereas he is necessarily not in touch with them in that way when movements of his body are occurring without his making them. A theory that is limited to describing causes prior to the occurrences of action and of mere bodily movements cannot possibly include an analysis of these two ways in which a person may be related to the movements of his body.” See “The Problem of Action” reprinted in his *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 71. I return briefly to Frankfurt’s work in the text above.

<sup>43</sup> See his paper “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person” reprinted in his *ibid.* pp. 11-25. It is important to note that Frankfurt does not consider himself to be a proponent of the standard story of action as I have described it thus far.

endorses a reason in the requisite way, he becomes an active participant in his own action, thereby producing and controlling the action in the right way. The idea of endorsement can be understood through Frankfurt's notion of the "unwilling addict".<sup>44</sup> According to Frankfurt, the unwilling addict possesses a desire to ingest a particular drug but does not want that desire to be effective in causing him to do so. When such an unwanted desire is effective in causing him to ingest the drug, he becomes alienated both from that desire and from his own action. Thus, when the unwilling addict guides his hand as he sticks the syringe in his arm and pushes the plunger, he is not an active participant in his own action, since he has not endorsed the desire that is effective in causing that action. If this example is tenable, then the distinction between those situations in which the agent endorses the relevant desire and those situations in which he does not tracks the distinction between those cases in which the agent is an active participant in the actions that he performs and those in which he is merely passive. When the agent has endorsed the desire that is effective in causing the action in question, the agent is thereby active.<sup>45</sup>

Growing out of criticisms of Frankfurt's notion of endorsement, the work of Michael Bratman and J. David Velleman are key components of this line of response to the worry that the standard story seems committed to the idea that the agent is a passive participant in his own actions.<sup>46</sup> In their own ways, Bratman and Velleman offer modified versions of the standard story that aim to incorporate something akin to the notion of endorsement. According to Bratman, the

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<sup>44</sup> See *ibid.* pp. 16-19.

<sup>45</sup> For an early and important criticism of Frankfurt's view, see Gary Watson's "Free Agency" published in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 72, Number 8, April 1975, pp. 205-220.

<sup>46</sup> For our purposes, the relevant texts are: Michael Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987) and *Structures of Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and J. David Velleman, *Practical Reflection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) and *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).



agent becomes an active participant in the actions that he performs through having temporally extended higher-order self-governing policies. Such policies state which desires and other motivational factors the agent should treat as considerations that support his action, that is, which motivational factors should have what Bratman calls “subjective normative authority”<sup>47</sup> within the agent’s own deliberation about what action he should perform in a given context. For example, in the case of the unwilling addict, he possesses two distinct motivational factors that are relevant to his deliberation about which action he should perform. On the one hand, he possesses a first-order desire to ingest the drug, and on the other hand, he possesses a second-order desire that that first-order desire be ineffective in bringing about his action. For Bratman, the agent becomes an active participant in his action in virtue of his self-governing policy, which suggests that his first-order desire is not one that the agent should treat as a consideration that supports his performing a particular action. When the agent ingests the drug, he is alienated from that action and is thus passive with respect to his performance thereof because his self-governing policy is failing to exert the requisite subjective normative authority over his deliberation and action. When the agent does not ingest the drug, he is an active participant in that action in the relevant sense because his self-governing policy exerts the requisite subjective normative authority over his deliberation and action. Thus, through the effectiveness of the self-governing policy and the subjective normative authority that it exerts over his deliberation and action, the agent can be an active participant in the actions that he performs.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See his *Structures of Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 91.

<sup>48</sup> Bratman is explicit that, if correct, this is a *reductive* account of the notion of an agent’s determination of an action. That is, it is a reductive account of the phenomenon of agent-determination, where that phenomenon “consists in some, perhaps complex, causal structure involving events, states, and processes of a sort we might appeal to within a broadly naturalistic psychology.” See *ibid.* pp. 91-92. It is reductive in the sense that the *causal role* of the agent in determining an action is explained with reference to something other than the agent himself, namely, the causal structure that

According to Velleman, the situation is slightly different. On Velleman's account, the agent becomes an active participant in the actions that he performs through his playing a specific functional role. The role in question is that of being prepared to reflect on and takes sides with the relevant motivational factors that are the potential causes of the actions that he performs. This role is to be found in a special desire that the agent possesses, namely, the desire to act in accordance with whichever of two or more motivational factors provides the strongest reason for acting in a particular way, a desire that drives practical thought itself. As he puts it: "What really produces the bodily movements that you are said to produce, then, is a part of you that performs the characteristic functions of agency. That part, I claim, is your desire to act in accordance with reasons, a desire that produces behavior, in your name, by adding its motivational force to that of whichever motives appear to provide the strongest reasons for acting, just as you are said to throw your weight behind them".<sup>49</sup> Thus, according to Velleman, the idea is that this special desire plays the role of the agent. The role of the agent is to *intermediate* in various ways between (1) his competing motivational factors and his intentions to act in particular kinds of ways, or between (2) his intentions to act in particular kinds of ways and his subsequent bodily movements. The desire to act in accordance with the strongest of the reasons that support a particular action plays just this role and is what enables the reduction of the causal role of the agent in the actions that he performs to the causal role of one of his desires. For example, in the case of the unwilling addict who possesses a first-order desire to ingest the drug and a second-order desire that that first-order desire be ineffective in bringing about his action, the agent can become an active participant in his subsequent action in virtue of this

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involves the events, states, and processes that fit within a broadly naturalistic psychology. I shall return to this in the text.

<sup>49</sup> See his "What Happens When Someone Acts?" reprinted in his *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 141.

special desire to act in accordance with the strongest of the reasons that support a particular action, in one of two ways. First, in the presence of the competing motivational factors (i.e., the first-order desire to ingest the drug and the second-order desire that that first-order desire be ineffective), the special desire can intervene so as to produce an intention to act in a way that is supported by the strongest or best reason, thereby overriding the causal effectiveness of the other motivational factor. Second, in the presence of two distinct intentions to act in two incompatible ways (i.e., either to ingest the drug or to refrain from ingesting the drug), the special desire can intervene so as to cause the bodily movements that realize the intention that is supported by the strongest or best reason, thereby overriding the causal effectiveness of the other intention. In both kinds of case, in virtue of the causal effectiveness of the special desire in playing the relevant functional role, the agent can be said to be an active participant in the relevant events. Thus, says Velleman, “a person may be an initiator of actions—and hence an agent—in the sense that there is an action-initiating system within him, a system that performs the functions in virtue of which he qualifies as an agent and which are ordinarily attributed to him in that capacity.”<sup>50</sup>

Notice that Bratman and Velleman are explicit about the fact that their respective modifications of the standard story offer a reductive account of the active role of the agent: the agent is an active participant in an action *in virtue of* the proper functioning of a higher-order planning policy (Bratman) or a special desire (Velleman) that causes the action in question in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well. And notice, too, that Bratman and Velleman modify the standard story in a way that retains its core event-causal claim, such that a complete explanation of an action performed by an agent in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well need not mention the agent at all, except by way of the fact that the agent’s body is moving in some way or

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<sup>50</sup> See *ibid.* p. 139.

other in virtue of the causal powers exerted by his reasons and other motivational factors. At best, the agent is involved in his own actions in a specifically *indirect* manner: when we say, for instance, that an agent is moving his legs as he walks along the sidewalk, in fact we are saying that the agent's body is moving in that way in virtue of the causal power of his motivational factors, including the relevant reasons, the higher-order planning policies that Bratman describes, and the special desire depicted by Velleman. Strictly speaking, the agent himself does not move his own legs or swing his own arms as he walks; his legs and arms are being moved by the causal force exerted by his reasons and the other motivational factors identified by Bratman and Velleman.

The second line of response to the problem of absence emerges from two recent criticisms of such Frankfurt-inspired amendments to the standard story. Both claim that in attempting to address the problem of absence in conditions akin to that faced by Frankfurt's unwilling addict, the above modifications of the standard story have overlooked a more fundamental kind of control that an agent exerts over his own bodily actions even in such conditions.<sup>51</sup> The first such criticism was recently raised by François Schroeter.<sup>52</sup> According to Schroeter, the above modifications of the standard story misrepresent what he calls the "basic executive control" that an agent has over the bodily actions that he performs.<sup>53</sup> The notion of basic executive control can be understood in the context of Frankfurt's notion of the unwilling addict. Recall that for Frankfurt, the unwilling addict is alienated from the bodily actions that he performs as he injects the drug into his arm because he does not endorse the desire that causes him to take the drug in question; he does not want that desire

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<sup>51</sup> Although it will not be the explicit focus of this chapter, I think this problem arises in the case of mental actions as well.

<sup>52</sup> See his paper "Endorsement and Autonomous Agency" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Volume LXIX, Number 3, November 2004, pp. 633-659.

<sup>53</sup> See *ibid.* pp. 638-642 for his explanation of this notion.

to be effective in causing him to take the drug. According to Schroeter, the unwilling addict is nevertheless in control of his bodily actions as he injects the drug into his arm: he is *attending to* and is *consciously aware* of what he is doing as he is readying himself to take the drug and his bodily actions are *not* occurring in a reflexive or quasi-reflexive manner.<sup>54</sup> Thus, says Schroeter, there is a clear sense in which there is no problem of absence, since the unwilling addict is in control of and participating in what he is doing insofar as he is conscious of and attending to what he is doing, even as the action in question is not endorsed by him as he performs it. The basic executive control that the unwilling addict has is thus overlooked by the above modifications of the standard story because such modifications suggest that the addict enjoys *no* control whatsoever of his bodily actions as he injects the drug into his arm, since he does not endorse the desire that is effective in causing him to take the drug. As Schroeter puts it: “Thus the addict is not a mere bystander of his actions: the addict’s conscious self participates in the execution of the action....”<sup>55</sup>

Now, I think Schroeter is correct to point out the important role of conscious awareness and attention in basic control and to claim that Frankfurt’s unwilling addict does in fact control his bodily actions as he injects the drug into his arm even while not wanting to do so: his bodily movements are neither reflexive nor quasi-reflexive, as Schroeter says, and they are not controlled by someone or something other than the addict. Thus, although the addict is alienated from his own

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<sup>54</sup> Schroeter makes a helpful distinction between (1) simple reflexes, (2) quasi-reflexive bodily movements, and (3) full-blooded bodily actions. See *ibid.* pp. 638-642. Simple reflexes involve little or no monitoring by the agent, such as when the agent’s leg moves as a result of being struck on the patellar tendon; quasi-reflexive bodily movements are more complex and involve at least some monitoring and control by the agent, such as when an agent avoids a sudden obstacle while riding a bike, thereby performing a rather complex movement without having an anticipatory awareness of the movement in question; and full-blooded bodily actions are complex and temporally extended bodily movements that are monitored and controlled by the agent in the sense that the agent is attending to and consciously aware of what he is doing or about to do, having an internal representation of the relevant action. Crucially, says Schroeter, quasi-reflexive bodily movements and simple reflexes *bypass* the agent’s conscious awareness and attention and in that sense they are not monitored or controlled by the agent.

<sup>55</sup> See *ibid.* p. 642.

bodily actions as he injects the drug, it does not follow that he is not in control of those very actions, in a more minimal way. However, Schroeter incorrectly characterizes the notion of basic executive control. For Schroeter, the agent exerts basic executive control through “central commands” that initiate the execution of the relevant action by directly triggering the relevant features of the bodily-motor system.<sup>56</sup> The central commands are orders or imperatives that the agent issues to himself much as he would to another person, such as when one might say “Start walking right now!” or “Concentrate on what you’re doing!”, etc. In addition to issuing forth such central commands, says Schroeter, the basic executive control that the agent exerts over his own actions includes a supervisory function, monitoring the action as it unfolds over time and ensuring that it continues until completion or is altered if need be.

The problem for Schroeter is this: the supervisory role of the agent in exerting basic executive control over his own actions does not place the agent *in the right kind of relation* with his own body and bodily movements as he performs a bodily action. As Schroeter depicts it, the relation between the agent and the actions that he performs is like that of a parent who supervises or oversees the actions of his children by attending to and being consciously aware of their movements, issuing forth verbal commands or imperatives that direct the action of the children so that they accord with the parent’s wishes, desires, beliefs, etc. If we take seriously Schroeter’s description of basic executive control, the agent triggers or activates his own bodily-motor system only by issuing forth verbalized commands, either aloud or silently to himself, so that basic bodily actions must be brought about

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<sup>56</sup> See *ibid.* p. 645. The sense in which central commands “directly” trigger the bodily-motor system is that there need not be any motivational factors that causally intermedate between the central commands issued by the agent and the activation of the bodily motor-system. Schroeter explains the process by which this occurs in terms of a power that the agent possesses, namely, “the power to send go-signals to initiate the execution of the actions which have been selected.” He cites Alfred Mele’s “Goal-Directed Action: Teleological Explanations, Causal Theories, and Deviance” in *Philosophical Perspectives*, Volume 14, October 2000, pp. 279-300, especially pp. 289-293, for discussion of something akin to the notion of a “go-signal”.

*through* the causal mediation of such commands. But the basic executive control that an agent has over his own basic bodily actions does not require this kind of verbal and causal intermediary. Basic executive control must be understood to be *more* basic than as described by Schroeter. That is, the kind of control that an agent has over his own basic bodily actions is not mediated in this kind of way by a verbalized imperative, whether uttered aloud or not. When an agent moves his legs while walking, say, he does not do so as a direct causal consequence of anything like the self-directed verbalized command to “Start walking right now!” Such commands might be useful or perhaps even necessary in special kinds of circumstances, but in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well they are neither necessary nor sufficient for an agent to exert this kind of basic executive control. We can see why this is the case by considering two facts. First, even in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well, the moment of or immediately after the agent issues a self-directed verbalized command like “Start walking right now!”, the agent must nevertheless do something in addition: the agent must initiate the movement of his own legs and then sustain that movement as the action continues. The agent does so by exerting the characteristic sort of effort that is required to causally initiate, sustain, and control the activation of his own bodily capacities in general, even in the performance of a basic bodily action.<sup>57</sup> The possibility of effort of this kind is not accommodated for in Schroeter’s account of basic control. Second, the basic bodily actions of agents who lack the capacities required for issuing such verbalized commands can nevertheless be under their direct control in this minimal sense. For example, before a human infant grows and matures into a young child that is capable of employing the relevant capacities, he can nevertheless control his own body in minimal and unsophisticated sorts of ways as he performs relatively simplistic basic bodily actions.

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<sup>57</sup> I introduced the relevant notion of effort in the previous chapter of this dissertation. I shall return to it in the text above.

A similar point can be made about the basic or minimal kind of control that non-human animals that lack the cognitive or linguistic capacities required to issue forth such commands can have over their own bodily actions.<sup>58</sup> I shall return to Schroeter's account of basic control below.

The second criticism of the above-mentioned Frankfurt-inspired responses to the problem of absence stems from the recent work of Markus Schlosser.<sup>59</sup> According to Schlosser, the standard story of action has the resources to ensure that the agent is in fact an active participant in the actions that he performs and so there is no problem of absence. Schlosser thinks that the sorts of modifications proposed by Bratman and Velleman can account for the kind of control that agents like the unwilling addict lack, but that they leave more basic or fundamental kinds of control unaccounted for.<sup>60</sup> In particular, Schlosser claims that in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well, the bodily actions that an agent performs are controlled by the agent *by default*. That is to say, unless defeating or abnormal conditions obtain, the agent automatically enjoys basic executive control over the bodily actions that he performs. Schlosser offers a reductive account of the notion of control, claiming that when a "feedback-comparison system" performs its characteristic function,

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<sup>58</sup> Although the point here does not turn on the phenomenology that might typically be associated with the experience of performing such basic bodily actions, I think that the sorts of experiences that agents have when performing such actions provides good evidence in support of this claim. For example, as I walk along the sidewalk, there is no sense in which I am issuing a self-directed verbalized command to do just that. If someone were to ask me to explain what I am doing, I might very well report that I am walking or perhaps that I am walking for such-and-so purpose, but the content that I thereby report need not and—at least in my own case—does not take the form of a command that precedes and causes my performance of such an action. If such self-directed verbalized commands were to be present and play such a crucial role in the basic executive control that an agent can exert over his own basic bodily actions, it seems reasonable to expect that they would manifest themselves to the agent during his experience when acting. Their absence provides at least *prima facie* evidence that they do not exist in that form and do not play that central role.

<sup>59</sup> See his paper "Agency, Ownership, and the Standard Story" published in Jesús H. Aguilar, Andrei A. Buckareff and Keith Frankish, eds., *New Waves in Philosophy of Action* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 13-31.

<sup>60</sup> Thus, Schlosser agrees with the criticism raised by Schroeter. However, Schlosser argues that Schroeter's account of basic executive control is problematic in its own right. See *ibid.* p. 29



the upshot is the production in the agent of a sense of control<sup>61</sup> over the bodily actions that he is performing: “Whenever a motor command for the performance of a bodily movement is sent from premotor areas [of the cortex] to the motor control system [of the cortex], a copy of this command is used to produce a prediction of the movement (a so-called *forward model*). This prediction is then sent to a comparator where it is compared with incoming visual and proprioceptive information concerning the actual movement. The main purpose of this sub-personal system is to monitor, correct and fine-tune movements.”<sup>62</sup> According to Schlosser, then, it is the proper functioning of this sub-personal system that is responsible for the agent’s sense that he is in control of his bodily actions, inasmuch as they seem to him to be his own doing, initiated and guided by him as they occur. Strictly speaking, if an agent believes that *he* is in control of his own bodily actions, this belief is false. The agent’s sub-personal system is in fact exerting the requisite control over the bodily movements that he performs in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well. Thus, concludes Schlosser, this explicitly reductive account of the role of the agent in the production and control of his own bodily actions ensures that the agent is neither passive nor absent but is already there from the start, as it were, as an active participant therein.

Now, I think that Schlosser, like Schroeter, is correct to claim that Frankfurt’s unwilling addict does indeed control his bodily actions as he injects the drug into his arm while not wanting to do so. An agent in the kind of situation encountered by the unwilling addict is at least minimally aware of and controlling, for example, the direction in which his arm moves as he aims the needle in the right place and depresses the plunger. His movements are neither reflexive responses to external stimuli nor are they quasi-reflexive movements in the sense described by Schroeter, and they are not

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<sup>61</sup> I return to the notion of a “sense of control” in the text above.

<sup>62</sup> See *ibid.* p. 29, his italics.

being controlled by another agent or entity of any kind. Thus, the unwilling addict is alienated from his own desire to take the drug and his actions as he does so but he is nevertheless exerting a minimal kind of control over those very actions and so the modifications to the standard story suggested by Bratman and Velleman are flawed inasmuch as they do not account for this basic kind of control. However, Schlosser, like Schroeter, incorrectly characterizes this more fundamental notion of control, and for very similar reasons. Schlosser's account of the notion of basic control does not make room for the characteristic kind of effort that an agent must exert during the performance of a bodily action, even in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well.

To see why this is the case, consider the following example of a relatively simple scenario in which an agent performs a bodily action in accord with Schlosser's account of control and the standard story of action.<sup>63</sup> Suppose that in suitably normal conditions and where all goes well, I'm tired and desire to drink coffee as soon as possible and I believe that the mug on the table in front of me contains coffee. Suppose further that after a brief moment of deliberation I come to believe that it is best for me to drink the coffee in the mug on the table in front of me rather than walk to the nearby café to buy a freshly brewed cup, and in light of my desire and beliefs, I form the immediate and executive intention to pick up the mug and drink its contents, and I do just that. In accordance with the account of basic control offered by Schlosser, the movement of my arm as I reach for the mug, my grasping of its handle as I pick it up, and the movement of my arm as I bring the mug back

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<sup>63</sup> In describing this scenario I make use of Schlosser's account of control and his defence of the standard story of action in his paper "Agent-Causation and Agential Control" in *Philosophical Explorations*, Volume 11, Issue 1, May 2008, pp. 3-21. Given Schlosser's account of control and the version of the standard story that he defends, we must suppose further that the *content* of the agent's intention causes the bodily movements that he performs and that he exerts control over such movements by way of the proper functioning of the feedback-comparison system that monitors and fine-tunes his bodily movements by using information received via perception and proprioception. This introduces complications into Schlosser's account of the standard story and of basic control, since it requires that content-laden mental states and events causally trigger the relevant bodily capacities in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well in virtue of their content, which is a form of "mental causation". I set aside these complications since they are not the target of my criticism.

towards my face, etc., occur by way of the causal force of the relevant motivational factors and the proper functioning of my sub-personally characterized feedback-comparison system as it monitors, corrects and fine-tunes my bodily movements, thereby producing in me a sense of control over the action that I am performing. As Schlosser describes it, the sense of control is the sense of “ownership of agency” which is understood to be “the sense that [our bodily] movements are our own doing, initiated and guided by us”.<sup>64</sup>

Unfortunately for Schlosser, there are three interrelated problems with this account of control and the supposed “sense of ownership” that an agent has regarding the bodily movements that he performs during an action. First, it is not clear what notion of *sense* is at play here and so it is not at all obvious that there is a single type of sense of “ownership of agency”.<sup>65</sup> Second, there is a crucial aspect of this basic kind of control that is not accounted for by Schlosser. What is missing from this description is the notion of effort. For Schlosser and the other proponents of the standard story that we have considered thus far, in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well, given my desire to drink coffee, my belief that the mug contains coffee, and my belief that it is best for me to drink this coffee rather than to walk to the nearby café and buy a freshly brewed cup, my immediate and executive intention to act simply and immediately causes me to perform the action that it makes intelligible. But the problem is that even in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well, there are conditions in which the formation of the executive intention to act requires effort on my part, and even after I form the executive intention to act, I must nevertheless move my arm by exerting effort, however minimal, so as to initiate the movement of my arm, to sustain it as it

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<sup>64</sup> See his *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>65</sup> See, for instance, Tim Bayne’s paper “The Sense of Agency” in Fiona Macpherson, ed., *The Senses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 355-374.

moves towards the mug on the table, to grasp my fingers around its handle, and to lift it towards my face. The effort that I exert is a fundamental aspect of the control that I have over my own bodily actions. Construing bodily action and basic control in the way that Schlosser does simply omits the possibility of such effort, since in normal conditions bodily actions are the causal byproduct of the relevant motivational factors, and basic control occurs by way of the proper functioning of the sub-personally described feedback-comparison system, so the agent to whom we ascribe the action in question is simply along for the ride. That is, in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well, the control that the agent has over his own body and bodily movements is *causally mediated by* the proper functioning of the sub-personally described feedback-comparison system as it monitors, corrects, and fine-tunes those of his bodily movements that have been caused by his motivational factors.<sup>66</sup> There is no possibility for the agent to exert effort as part of the control that he has over his own bodily actions and this is problematic, as will be explained below. Third and finally, for Schlosser and the other adherents of the standard story of action that we have considered thus far, in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well bodily action is the causal byproduct of the *rationality strongest* of the agent's motivational factors that make intelligible or rationalize the action in question. That is, the particular motivational factors that are successful in causing the bodily action that they make intelligible manage to do so *because* of their rational strength, thereby conflating the notion of *rational strength* with the notion of *causal strength*.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Just to be clear, the worry that I am raising is not with the reductive component of Schlosser's account of control but with the "sense of control" as he describes it in the context of his account thereof. Note, too, that this is the same type of problem faced by Schroeter's account of control.

<sup>67</sup> This aspect of the standard story goes back at least to Davidson. See his *op. cit.*, p. xvi, where he says "if reasons are causes, it is natural to suppose that the strongest reasons are the strongest causes." For a criticism of the standard story of action that exploits just this distinction, see David-Hillel Ruben's paper "Causal and Deliberative Strength of Reasons for Action: The Case of Con-Reasons" in Jesús H. Aguilar and Andrei A. Buckareff, eds., *Causing Human Actions: New Perspectives on the Causal Theory of Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2010), pp. 167-182.

The second and third problems are related in a crucial way. The fact that the standard story does not include the possibility of effort can be explained in part by the conflation of the notions of rational and causal strength. The reason why is as follows: according to the standard story, in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well, a particular bodily action is caused by the rationally strongest of the agent's motivational factors, where the notion of rational strength is understood in terms of the agent's assessment of the motivational factors in question.<sup>68</sup> What, exactly, does the agent assess? Consider again the above-mentioned example in which after a brief moment of deliberation I form the immediate and executive intention to drink the contents of the mug on the table in front of me and I do just that. Here, my assessment of the relevant motivational factors can be understood as follows: given my desire to drink coffee as soon as possible and my belief that the mug on the table contains coffee, I came to believe that taking a sip from the mug on the table is the best way to satisfy my desire, better than walking to the nearby café to buy a freshly brewed cup. Thus, I came to believe that drinking from the mug on the table is supported by the rationally strongest of my motivational factors and as a result of my assessment of their rational strength I came to form the immediate and executive intention to perform the relevant action. According to the standard story, this is precisely my role as agent, as it were, in the causal production of my own bodily action: once an intention to perform the relevant action results from my assessment of the rational strength of the motivational factors that support my doing so, the rest of

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<sup>68</sup> This point was raised in the first section above. See note 35.

the causal work is out of my hands in the sense that, so long as conditions remain suitably normal and all goes well, the action in question is immediately caused by my intention to do just that.<sup>69</sup>

#### 4. *Strength of Will and the Standard Story*

We are now in a position to understand how this essential aspect of the standard story overlooks the effort that an agent must sometimes exert in order to form an intention to act, as well as the effort required to perform even the simplest of bodily actions. Consider the following example in which an agent displays what we shall call “strength of will”. Imagine an agent who has recently decided to run an upcoming marathon. Before coming to make this decision, the agent deliberated about the motivational factors that support his doing so and compared those with the motivational factors that support his refraining from doing so. After this process of deliberation, he decided to run the marathon, formed an intention to do so, and embarked on an ambitious training plan. Imagine further that today is the day of the race and all of the relevant conditions pertaining to the agent are suitably normal. The starter pistol has been fired and the agent is now in the midst of running the first mile. Let’s assume that while running the first mile of the race we can describe his state of mind as follows, whether he would do so or not: “After a lengthy process of deliberation I decided to run this marathon, thereby came to form an intention to do so, and embarked on an ambitious training plan. At the outset of this marathon, all things remaining equal, my intention to complete this race

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<sup>69</sup> Note that this description construes my relation to my motivational factors in a *passive* manner. The proponent of the standard story cannot say that *I* caused my intention since there can be no agent causation in the performance of any action. In suitably normal conditions and when all goes well, such mental events *must* be understood to result from the causal force of the rationally strongest motivational factors that make that event intelligible by the agent’s own lights. I return to the issue of mental action in chapter four.

is rationally strongest amongst my motivational factors, as evinced by the fact that it has caused and makes intelligible my running.”

Now suppose that, twenty-three miles later, an extremely powerful desire to stop running the race makes itself vividly known to the agent. Let's assume that we can describe his state of mind as follows, whether he would do so or not: “I am in excruciating pain, near the point of collapse, am most likely doing damage to my body, and find myself with an extremely potent desire to stop running this marathon. I am no longer convinced that my intention to run this marathon is rationally strongest amongst my motivational factors. In fact, I now believe that my desire to stop running this marathon is better supported by reason and is rationally strongest amongst my motivational factors.” Finally, suppose that, in spite of the overwhelmingly powerful desire to stop running and the newly acquired belief that doing so is better supported by reason and is the rationally strongest motivational factor, the agent manages to finish the race. According to the standard story, is such a thing possible? That is, can the standard story explain how it is possible for an agent to exert the effort required to *overcome* a powerful desire and belief that threatens a previous intention and the action currently being performed? It seems that the standard story implies that in situations of the above kind, the agent *must* succumb to the rationally strongest motivational factor and alter or forgo his previous intention and thereby stop performing the action in question. The possibility that the agent might overcome the rationally strongest motivational factor and perform an action that is supported by a rationally weaker one is ruled out.

Before considering how a defender of the standard story might respond to this worry, it is worth making explicit the role of effort in situations of this kind. Here, effort plays two related roles. First, a distinctive kind of effort is required for the agent to continue running in spite of the

pain and discomfort that he is experiencing, the persistent and powerful desire to stop running, and the newly acquired belief that doing so is supported by the rationally strongest motivational factor. There are a number of ways in which he might attempt to do so. For example, he might force himself to *ignore* the pain and his new desire and belief, perhaps by attending to or thinking about something else entirely. Or he might bring to mind his original intention and the original motivational factors that supported his running the race and attempt to *block* or *suppress* the causal and rational strength of his new desire and belief, or *reinforce* the causal and rational strength of his previous intention.<sup>70</sup> Regardless of the strategy that he employs, we are imagining that the agent *forces* himself to continue running, that he exerts effort so as to continuously employ those of his bodily capacities that are used when running, and that he does so as his original motivational factors are no longer deemed by him to be rationally strongest. But if the standard story is correct, he simply cannot continue to run in those conditions; as soon as his original intention and the original motivational factors that supported his running are no longer deemed to be rationally stronger than his newfound desire to stop running and his newly acquired belief that doing so is the rationally strongest motivational factor, he must form the requisite intention and thereby stop running. That is, the moment that the original intention to run the marathon and the motivational factors in light of which that intention was formed are no longer rationally strongest by his own assessment, then, since the standard story conflates rational and causal strength, it follows that they are no longer causally strongest. And if they are no longer causally strongest, the causal power that they exert must cease and so too must the bodily action that they were causing up until that moment in time. But as

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<sup>70</sup> Richard Holton has suggested something along these lines. See his "Intention and Weakness of Will" in *Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 96, Number 5, May 1999, pp. 241-262, "How Is Strength of Will Possible?" in Sarah Stroud and Christine Tappolet, eds., *Weakness of Will and Practical Irrationality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 39-67, and *Willing, Wanting, Waiting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). I shall criticize Holton's account of strength of will in chapter three.



the above example suggests, there are situations in which it is possible that the agent continues to perform the relevant bodily action and this possibility cannot figure in the standard story.

Something else explains the possibility that the agent continues to perform the relevant bodily action, something that has been omitted from the standard story of action. That, I suggest, is the effort by which the agent employs the relevant bodily capacities during his performance of the action in question and by which he continues to do so in the new circumstances. Crucially, the effort that the agent exerts in order to run in spite of the pain and the other newfound motivational factors is of the very same kind that he must exert when initiating the relevant bodily capacities at the outset of the race, the only difference being the relative strength with which he exerts the effort in question.<sup>71</sup>

The second and related role of effort in situations of this kind is that which enables the agent to *resist* modifying or relinquishing his previous intention in light of the pain and other newfound motivational factors. The standard story cannot account for this either. According to the standard story, in suitably normal conditions and when all goes well, as soon as the agent comes to believe that his desire to stop running the marathon is better supported by reason and is rationally strongest amongst his motivational factors, he must thereby come to form the requisite intention to stop running and do precisely that. But as the above example suggests, there are situations in which it is possible for the agent to intervene and resist the rational and causal force of the motivational factors that he deems to be rationally strongest, thereby adhering to a previous intention that is no longer supported by the rationally strongest of his motivational factors. The agent can do so in a variety of ways, as suggested above, but regardless of the strategy that he employs, the agent *forces* himself to avoid modifying or relinquishing his previous intention as he continues to run through the pain, he

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<sup>71</sup> We can understand this kind of effort as bodily inasmuch as it is being exerted by the agent in order to continuously sustain the activation of the relevant bodily capacities as he continues to run while his previous intention and motivational factors are no longer deemed by him to be rationally strongest.

exerts effort so as to resist changing his mind, and he does so whilst his original motivational factors are no longer rationally strongest. If the standard story is correct, though, he simply cannot do so. Crucially, the effort that the agent exerts in order to avoid modifying or relinquishing his previous intention in spite of the pain and the other newfound motivational factors is of the very same kind that he must exert when initiating the relevant cognitive capacities during the formation of that original intention or any other mental action, the only difference being the relative strength with which he exerts the effort in question.<sup>72</sup>

Now, there are a number of ways in which a defender of the standard story might attempt to reply to this objection. In increasing order of importance, they are as follows:

- *Standing Background Intention:* The marathon runner continues to run through the pain and does not modify or surrender his prior intention because he has a standing background intention to be persistent in precisely these sorts of cases. To have strength of will is just to have such an intention to persist in conditions of this kind and so the notion of effort is not required to explain what occurs.
- *Habit:* It is not the case that any kind or degree of effort is involved, since the marathon runner is continuing to run and is not modifying or relinquishing his previous intention because his actions are caused by the sheer force of a habit instilled through training. That is, he is operating on something akin to “auto-pilot” and so the notion of effort is not required to explain what occurs.

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<sup>72</sup> We can understand this kind of effort as mental inasmuch as it is being exerted by the agent in order to resist re-activating the cognitive capacity or capacities used when forming an intention to act.

- *Error*: The marathon runner's assessment of the rational strength of his motivational factors is incorrect. His newly acquired motivational factors are in fact not rationally stronger than his previous motivational factors and thus he neither stops running nor modifies or relinquishes his previous intention and the notion of effort is not required to explain what occurs.
- *Outlier*: The situation faced by the marathon runner is not "suitably normal" and hence all does not go well, so the situation faced by the marathon runner fails to be a genuine challenge to the fundamental tenets of the standard story.

Unfortunately for the defender of the standard story, none of these replies successfully meets the challenge that has been introduced by the example of the marathon runner. To see why, let's address each in turn.

The first reply attempts to construe the notion of strength of will in terms of an intention<sup>73</sup> to be persistent in precisely the kinds of conditions faced by the marathon runner. For an agent to have strength of will just is for the agent to have such an intention and for it to function properly in the requisite sorts of scenarios. The problem with this reply is that understanding strength of will in this manner does not allow for the possibility of effort on the part of the agent. What the proponent of the standard story needs to capture is the *effort* that the marathon runner exerts in resisting the rational and causal force of his newly acquired motivational factors and in continuing to run the marathon as he does so.

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<sup>73</sup> This reply can be modified so as to use a belief or desire, rather than an intention, but the response that I am about to make applies in each case.

The second reply denies that the notion of effort is required to explain what occurs in the scenario faced by the marathon runner on the grounds that his actions are habitual and thus require no effort. That is, the marathon runner continues to run through the pain and in spite of his newly acquired motivational factors by the sheer force of a habit instilled through training. The problem is that, although there certainly are habitually performed actions that seem to require very little effort on the part of the agent<sup>74</sup>, the situation faced by the marathon runner is simply not one of them. As mentioned in the first response above, the proponent of the standard story needs to capture the characteristic kind of effort that the marathon runner exerts in resisting the rational and causal force of his newly acquired motivational factors and in continuing to run the marathon as he does so.

The third reply denies that the marathon runner has correctly assessed the rational strength of his newly acquired motivational factors and that his original motivational factors remain rationally strongest, which is evinced by the fact that he continues to run and manages to finish the race. The problem with this reply is that it alters the standard story in a fundamental manner. As it has been described thus far, the standard story explains bodily action in terms of the causal force of those of the agent's motivational factors that make intelligible the action in question *according to the agent's own assessment* of their rational strength. That is, the standard story attempts to characterize what it is about the action that appeals *to the agent* and so it does not matter whether the agent has accurately assessed the rational strength of any given motivational factor. If we take something akin to an "externalist" perspective and say that, as a matter of fact, a motivational factor can be rationally

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<sup>74</sup> There are situations in which, after an agent has initiated the bodily capacities used in the performance of a bodily action, the continued performance of the action in question occurs with the assistance of something like a habit. For instance, after I begin to walk on the sidewalk, I might answer my cell phone and have a conversation with a friend while I continue to walk. As I talk on the phone, my continued walking can be described as occurring in a habitual manner, especially if I am walking along a familiar route, in the sense that I am not *fully* attending to or consciously aware of my walking or the effort that I am exerting to keep my legs in motion. But this is not like what the marathon runner is doing in the type of scenario described above.

strongest in spite of the agent's assessment to the contrary, then we have altered the standard story in a drastic manner.

The fourth reply can be divided in two, depending on the way in which we understand the sense in which the relevant conditions might fail to be "suitably normal". On the one hand, we might understand suitably normal conditions as those in which deviant causal chains are absent. On the other hand, we might understand suitably normal conditions as those in which the agent is acting rationally.<sup>75</sup> Each version of the reply is problematic. First, there are no deviant causal chains present in the production of the relevant bodily action in the case of the marathon runner. Recall Davidson's well-known example of the nervous climber, introduced above. Although the climber wants to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding the rope and believes that loosening his hold on the rope would enable him to do so, his doing precisely that is caused not by the relevant motivational factors but the intervening state of nervousness, thereby undermining the sense in which he is in control of what is occurring and its status as an action. In contrast, when the marathon runner refuses to augment or relinquish his prior intention and continues to run the race in spite of his newly acquired motivational factors, there is nothing akin to a deviant causal chain producing his bodily action. There is nothing abnormal occurring within his body, he is not unconscious, and he remains in control of his bodily action. There is no control-undermining intermediary state that causes his continued performance of the relevant action, and there is no causal intervention or coercion by an external force or agent of any kind. Moreover, the marathon runner is not in a position like that of Frankfurt's unwilling addict. The marathon runner intends to finish the race even in the presence of his newly acquired motivational factors, so he is not like the unwilling addict who ingests the drug in spite of not wanting to do so. Thus, he is in control of his

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<sup>75</sup> Though offered in a different context, I thank Akeel Bilgrami for raising a similar distinction during conversation.

bodily action even while he believes that his desire to stop running is rationally strongest amongst his motivational factors, thereby disconnecting the notion of rational strength from that of causal strength and thus undermining the standard story by showing that it is not the case that the rationally strongest motivational factor causes the action that it makes intelligible. Through exerting the effort required to continue running and to refrain from altering or giving up his previous intention, he is exerting a causal force that is fundamentally distinct from that of his motivational factors. He is intervening to act in spite of their rational and causal strength.

The other sense in which the relevant conditions faced by the marathon runner might fail to be suitably normal can be understood in terms of a notion of rationality. In this context, the relevant notion of rationality is “means-end” or “practical” rationality, where an agent is rational in this sense if and only if he performs a bodily action that is suggested by the motivational factor that he deems to be rationally strongest, whether or not his assessment thereof is correct.<sup>76</sup> Thus, this second version of the fourth reply suggests that by refusing to augment or relinquish his prior intention in the presence of his assessment of the superior rational strength of his newly acquired motivational factors, the marathon runner fails to perform the action that would satisfy the rationally strongest factor and so he fails to act rationally. That is, given his acknowledgement of the rational strength of the newly acquired motivational factors, the rational course of action for the agent would be to form the requisite intention to stop running and do precisely that. Since he fails to stop

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<sup>76</sup> Given this notion of rationality, what is it for an agent to deem or believe that a particular motivational factor is “rationally strongest”? To adhere to the formulation of the standard story as it has been described thus far (i.e., on the basis of Davidson’s original formulation), we construe the notion of rational strength “internally”. Thus, a motivational factor is “rationally strongest” when it is *felt most vividly* by the agent, such that in the same way that an agent comes to be aware of his desire to stop running (or any other motivational factor), the agent comes to be aware of its *force* and formulates his belief concerning its “rational strength” in the light thereof. If one is already convinced that the standard story problematically conflates the notions of rational and causal strength, one might question whether this is a genuine notion of “rational” strength.

running, he fails to act rationally, and so the situation is not normal and all does not go well in that sense. If this reply is correct, then the example is not a genuine threat to the standard story.

There are two points to be made in response. First, it is not obvious that in refusing to alter or forgo his prior intention and in continuing to run the marathon in spite of his newly acquired motivational factors the agent is being irrational, even by his own lights. His assessment of the rational strength of the newly acquired motivational factors *considered alone* might suggest a particular course of action that as a rational agent he ought to pursue, but his assessment of those particular motivational factors does not occur in isolation. The agent has neither forgotten nor given up his prior intention to run the race and the motivational factors that rationally support and make intelligible his doing so. Given the entire assortment of motivational factors, both the newly acquired and the previous ones, it is not clear that his refusal to alter or relinquish his prior intention and his continued running of the marathon is irrational. Second, and more importantly for present purposes, the deeper criticisms of the standard story that are raised by the example of the marathon runner still apply. The example is a reminder that there are situations in which an agent exerts effort in order to remain steadfast in his adherence to a prior intention, whether doing so is rational or not, in the relevant sense. And the fact that the agent forces himself to run in spite of his excruciating pain, near exhaustion, and other newfound motivational factors cannot be explained by the standard story, since the performance of that bodily action does not occur as a result of the causal and rational force of the original motivational factors. That is, in overcoming the causal and rational force of the desire to stop running, whether doing so is rational by his lights or not, the marathon runner is exerting effort to refrain from modifying or giving up his prior intention, and while he does so,

however briefly, he is continuing to run in spite of the fact that his original motivational factors are no longer rationally strongest. The standard story fails to account for such a situation.

The upshot of the example of the marathon runner is that in order to explain the fact that an agent can overcome the rationally strongest of his motivational factors, we need to make room for the distinctive sort of effort that he can exert in the process of overcoming a persistent motivational factor that threatens to thwart his performance of an action as he continues to perform it. In such conditions, since the original motivational factors that explain and cause his performance of that action are not deemed to be as rationally powerful as his newfound desire to stop, such factors cannot explain his continued running; and since he continues to run in spite of the powerful desire to stop, that desire cannot explain and cause his continued running either. Something else must explain the fact that he continues to use the relevant bodily capacities in the midst of this struggle. I suggest that this additional feature can be understood in terms of the effort that an agent exerts in using the relevant bodily capacities and which can be explained by postulating the existence of a distinctive causal power that the agent employs when exerting the effort required to causally initiate, sustain, and control his bodily capacities in the performance of an action, something that cannot be reduced to the motivational factors and their causal relations as they figure in the standard story.

Crucially, the notion of effort enables us to explain the active role of the agent in the production of his own bodily actions and the special causal relation that obtains between the agent and his own bodily actions during his performance thereof. The distinctively active nature of bodily action as such—explained here in terms of the effort exerted by the agent so as to causally initiate, sustain, and control the activation of his own bodily capacities—is a feature of such action that the standard story is unable to capture, since according to that story every action that occurs is explained



in *passive* terms, as the onset of an event that is the causal effect of the onset of a previous event. This conception of action incorrectly situates the agent in a distinctively passive relation with his own body and bodily movements during the performance of a bodily action, since his bodily movements are causally mediated by the onset of the relevant motivational factors, thereby failing to account for the active nature of bodily action.

### 5. *Responding to Davidson's Challenge*

In this penultimate section, I respond to Davidson's challenge as it was introduced above. Recall that Davidson's challenge is this: it seems possible for an agent to have two or more distinct collections of motivational factors that each makes intelligible the performance of a particular bodily action even though the action in question occurred only by way of one such factor, so we must provide a means of identifying the particular collection of motivational factors that were relevant to the agent's performance of that bodily action. Davidson claimed that the fact that the agent performs the action for one set of motivational factors rather than the other is best explained by assuming that the relevant factors are those which *caused* the agent's performance of that action, thereby enabling us to exclude the others on the grounds that they did not exert the relevant causal force in bringing about the action in question. The upshot, according to Davidson, is that if we deny that the agent's motivational factors play this causal role in the production of a bodily action, we have no way of explaining the fact that the agent performs the action for one set of motivational factors rather than the other.

Alfred Mele has presented an example designed to illustrate the challenge.<sup>77</sup> Here is the example:

Al has a pair of [motivational factors] for mowing his lawn this morning. First, he wants to mow it this week and he believes that this morning is the most convenient time. Second, Al has an urge to repay his neighbor for the rude awakening he suffered recently when she turned on her mower at the crack of dawn and he believes that his mowing his lawn this morning would constitute suitable repayment. As it happens, Al mows his lawn this morning only for one of these [motivational factors]. In virtue of what is it true that he mowed his lawn for this [motivational factor], and not the other, if not that this [motivational factor] (or his having of it), and not the other, played a suitable causal role in his mowing his lawn?

It is important to remember that this challenge is not intended to provide a *positive* argument in favor of the standard story of action. It is intended to show that non-causal accounts of action face an insurmountable challenge, that of identifying the fact in virtue of which it is true that an agent performed a bodily action in light of one particular collection of motivational factors rather than another, where both make intelligible the action in question. Thus, in order to further undermine the standard story of action, we can respond to this challenge in a way that illustrates that that story does not in fact offer the most plausible explanation of what occurs in situations of this kind.

The alternative response to Davidson's challenge is this: the relevant fact can be understood in terms of the agent's *deliberation* and subsequent *understanding* of the motivational factors at play. Thus, using Mele's example, we can explain what occurs in the following way: Al is fully aware of his desire to mow his lawn this week and his belief that this morning is the most convenient time to do so, and he is fully aware of his desire to avenge his recent rude awakening at the hands of his inconsiderate neighbor and his belief that mowing his lawn this morning would be suitable repayment. As it happens, Al mows his lawn this morning only so as to satisfy his desire to mow his

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<sup>77</sup> See his paper "Goal-Directed Action: Teleological Explanations, Causal Theories, and Deviance" in *Philosophical Perspectives*, Volume 14, October 2000, pp. 279-300. The example is described on p. 280.

lawn this week and not so as to satisfy his desire for revenge. He mowed his lawn for that purpose after considering the relevant motivational factors, in which he compared the merits of each set of motivational factors and on the basis of which he came to understand that he would rather not satisfy his desire for revenge. As a result, he formed an intention to mow his lawn this morning so as to satisfy his desire to do so this week and he did just that.

Crucially, we can explain what occurs here in a way that does not attribute causal force or power to the relevant motivational factors or the mental events in which they figure, by using the alternative account of action presented in light of the example of the marathon runner and introduced in the previous chapter of this dissertation. Such an explanation attributes to Al three distinct abilities: first, the ability to exert effort so as to causally initiate the activation of his bodily capacities in the performance of the bodily action in question; second, the ability to exert effort so as to initiate the activation of his cognitive capacities in the performance of the mental action of deliberation; and third, the ability to perform the relevant bodily action in light of the way in which he understands the rational strength of the relevant motivational factors after his act of deliberation. On this alternative account, the understanding that Al has is crucial to his performance of the action in question but is not itself thereby causally efficacious. It is crucial in the sense that his state of understanding explains why he performed the action that he did in light of one set of motivational factors rather than the other, such that his understanding is that fact in virtue of which it is true that he performed the relevant bodily action in light of one particular collection of motivational factors rather than another. Thus, we can address the challenge raised by Davidson in a way that does not require us to assume that the motivational factors that explain an agent's performance of a particular action thereby cause it.

## 6. *Concluding Remarks and Looking Ahead*

In this chapter, I have argued that the standard story of action is insufficient on the grounds that it cannot explain situations in which an agent displays strength of will. I claimed that strength of will cannot be explained by the standard story because that story fails to capture the characteristic kind of effort that an agent exerts when overcoming the causal and rational force of a powerful and persistent motivational factor that threatens to undermine a previous intention and the performance of the relevant bodily action. The standard story implies that, in the type of scenario depicted by the example of the marathon runner, an agent must succumb to the causal force of the rationally strongest motivational factor and thereby form the requisite intention and perform the relevant bodily action, ruling out the possibility that an agent can exert effort in order to continue performing the contrary action while resisting the causal force of the rationally strongest motivational factor. I suggested that the possibility that an agent can overcome the strongest of his motivational factors whilst continuing to use the bodily capacities in the performance of the action that is under threat can be explained in terms of the effort that the agent exerts in using the relevant bodily capacities in the midst of refusing to forgo or alter his prior intention, an effortful exertion that cannot be reduced to or explained in terms of the sorts of motivational factors that figure in the standard story.

In addition, I offered a reply to Davidson's challenge in which I argued that in order to understand why an agent performed an action in light of one particular motivational factor rather than another, it is not required that the motivational factor in question be understood to *cause* the

agent's performance of the action that it makes intelligible. Rather, we can explain the fact in virtue of which it is true that an agent performed a bodily action in light of one set of motivational factors rather than another in terms of the agent's deliberation and subsequent understanding of the factors at play. In this manner, we can respond to the challenge raised by Davidson in a way that does not assume that the motivational factors that explain an agent's performance of a particular action thereby cause it.

In the next chapter, I will describe and then criticize Richard Holton's novel and important account of strength of will and further elaborate my own account that builds upon the notion of effort as it has been developed thus far. I shall argue that, on Holton's account of strength of will, we are left wanting an explanation of (1) how, exactly, an agent increases the motivational efficacy of a motivational factor simply by bringing it to awareness without revision or reevaluation and of (2) the active role that the agent plays both in cases where strength of will is displayed and in cases of action in general. When we limit our conception of will-power to the kinds of cases that Holton considers, we limit ourselves to thinking of will-power in overly intellectual terms, as a faculty limited to the operations of the intellect. In response to these difficulties, I shall further elaborate the account presented thus far by suggesting that we understand bodily and mental action in terms of the capacities that an agent actively employs as he performs such actions, and that the notion of will-power is applicable to the explanation of action in general, precisely as that causal power which explains the ability of the agent to activate the capacities in question.

## *Chapter Three*

### *Understanding Strength of Will*

In his recent work, Richard Holton has presented an important criticism of two prominent accounts of action, a criticism which employs a notion of strength of will.<sup>78</sup> Holton claims that these well-known accounts of action cannot explain cases in which an agent adheres to the dictates of a previous resolution, in spite of a persistent desire to the contrary. In this chapter, I offer an explanation and defense of Holton's criticism of these prominent accounts of action, and I argue that, while Holton highlights a crucial deficiency in both, his own explanation of strength of will is problematic.

#### *1. Strength of Will as Adherence to a Resolution*

How does one succeed in persisting with a resolution in the face of a compelling desire to the contrary? According to Richard Holton, two prominent accounts of action cannot explain cases in

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<sup>78</sup> See his "Intention and Weakness of Will" in *Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 96, Number 5, May 1999, pp. 241-162, "How Is Strength of Will Possible?" in Sarah Stroud and Christine Tappolet, eds., *Weakness of Will and Practical Irrationality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 39-67, and *Willing, Wanting, Waiting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). As will become apparent in the text, the notion of strength of will employed by Holton is importantly different from that introduced earlier in this dissertation.

which one manages to do precisely this sort of thing. He describes the two accounts<sup>79</sup> as follows:

*The Humean*<sup>80</sup> *Account*: All action is explained in terms of one's beliefs and desires, where one acts on whichever of one's desires are strongest.<sup>81</sup> On this account, when an agent adheres to the dictates of a resolution, the resolution itself must be understood either as the strongest desire or the strongest combination of beliefs and desires.

*The Modified Humean*<sup>82</sup> *Account*: All action is explained in terms of one's beliefs, desires, and intentions, where intentions are a *sui generis* kind of motivational factor, irreducible to the other two, and where one acts on whichever motivational factor is strongest. On this account, when an agent adheres to the dictates of a resolution, the resolution itself is the strongest motivational factor.

Why does Holton think that neither of these accounts of action can explain cases in which an agent succeeds in persisting with a resolution in the face of a compelling desire to the contrary? To understand why, imagine the following scenario. Imagine someone who has recently decided that he

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<sup>79</sup> Note that the accounts of action that Holton criticizes are instances of the standard story of action, as it was introduced in chapter two. Thus, both depict bodily actions as events that are *caused by* the onset of those of the agent's beliefs, desires, intentions, and other motivational factors that explain or make intelligible the action in question. Part of Holton's interest in these accounts of action is whether they can explain an agent's ability to adhere to a resolution in the face of a strong desire to the contrary, given the way they account for the *causation* of action. See his "How Is Strength of Will Possible?" in *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>80</sup> Here, Holton intends to refer to Donald Davidson's "Actions, Reasons, and Causes", reprinted in his *Essays on Actions and Events*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>81</sup> Note that when Holton presents these accounts of action, he does not specify what it means to say of a belief, desire, intention, or other motivational factor that it is "strongest".

<sup>82</sup> Here, Holton cites the work of Michael Bratman in *Intention, Plans and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

should give up coffee and who now desires to refrain from drinking coffee. Imagine further that I present this person with the opportunity to drink a freshly brewed cup of coffee from his favorite café and he finds himself with a compelling desire to accept my offer. In spite of this strong desire to do otherwise, though, he refrains from accepting my offer, thereby adhering to his previous decision and displaying what Holton is here calling strength of will.

How might a proponent of the Humean Account of action explain such cases? According to Holton, the most promising way to explain strength of will on the Humean Account is as follows. Using the above example, after deciding that he should give up coffee, the imagined person thereby comes to desire that he refrain from drinking coffee rather than doing so. When presented with the opportunity to drink a freshly brewed cup of coffee from his favorite café, though, he is confronted with a compelling desire to drink it, a desire that is felt more powerfully than the previous desire to refrain from drinking. If the Humean Account of action is correct and our imagined person must act on his strongest desire, then he will succumb to the compelling desire to drink coffee and thereby fail to display strength of will. So how might people who are confronted with this pattern of desires show strength of will? What might the proponent of the Humean Account say here?

Holton identifies two options, one in which further desires are added to the mix, and another that involves adding further beliefs. For the first option, Holton suggests that the proponent of the Humean Account could add a strong desire to adhere to one's previous decision, thereby understanding a resolution as special kind of desire that is designed to block compelling desires to the contrary. Here, a resolution is a second-order desire to be unmoved by particular first-order desires. Thus, at the moment in time when our imaginary person is confronted with a compelling desire to drink a cup of coffee, provided that his second-order desire to be unmoved by precisely this



kind of first-order desire is stronger than the first-order desire itself, he has a desire-driven way in which he can resist the temptation to break with his previous decision.

For the second option, Holton suggests that the proponent of the Humean Account could add a further belief rather than an additional desire. The belief in question involves accepting two propositions: (a) if one resists the next cup of coffee, one will give up drinking coffee for good; (b) if one fails to resist the next cup of coffee, one will fail to give up drinking coffee for good. The first proposition expresses the idea that resisting the next cup of coffee will be an *effective* means of giving up coffee for good, so that accepting the proposition will enable one to believe that resisting the desire to drink the next cup of coffee will play an instrumental role in realizing one's desire to give up coffee for good. The second proposition expresses the idea that resisting the next cup of coffee is *necessary* in order for one to be successful in giving up coffee for good, so that accepting the proposition will enable one to avoid believing that one can *both* drink the next cup of coffee *and* be successful in giving up coffee for good. Here, a resolution is a two-pronged belief that is designed to reinforce the motivational power of one's decision in the presence of strong inclinations to do otherwise. Thus, at the moment when our imaginary person is confronted with a compelling desire to drink a cup of coffee, provided that he believes both propositions to be true, he has a belief-driven way in which he can strengthen his desire to resist the temptation to break with his previous decision.

Before explaining why Holton thinks that both options fail to explain strength of will, it is worth pointing out another option that he does not explore in detail, namely, a combination of the two responses into a single, unified explanation of how one might manage to overcome a strong desire that threatens to thwart a prior decision. The unified explanation suggests that a resolution

can be understood as a second-order desire that is designed to block compelling first-order desires that tempt one to violate a previous decision, and that the second-order desire functions as such precisely because of the motivational significance of the two-pronged belief. That is, when one comes to believe that (a) if one resists the next cup of coffee, one will give up drinking coffee for good, and that (b) if one fails to resist the next cup of coffee, one will fail to give up drinking coffee for good, one *thereby* comes to have a second-order desire to be resolute in the face of contrary first-order desires. In essence, coming to believe both propositions is viewed as a means of creating a resolution, which is understood as a desire that functions to lessen or defeat the motivational impact of desires to the contrary.

Now, according to Holton, neither option saves the Humean Account of action from the charge of implausibility. Why? Even if we incorporate the above responses into the Humean Account, it maintains that adhering to a resolution consists in the triumph of a stronger desire over a weaker one, a victory that occurs in any situation in which one acts in light of one's strongest desire. Thus, if the Humean Account were correct, then we would expect that acting in light of one's strongest desire in mundane cases would be *just like* or *identical to* acting in accordance with a resolution in the face of a compelling desire to the contrary, since in both cases an action results simply from the triumph of a stronger desire over a weaker one. But this is not correct, says Holton, for it is often the case that one must *struggle*<sup>83</sup> to maintain a resolution in the face of a desire to do otherwise. That is to say, it is often the case that one adheres to a resolution only by way of struggling to resist a compelling desire to the contrary, which is not unlike what occurs when one is

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<sup>83</sup> As will become clear in the text, the notion of struggle as employed by Holton is different from the notion of effort employed thus far in this dissertation. For Holton, the notion of struggle is applicable only in cases where an agent maintains his commitment to a resolution in the face of a compelling desire to do otherwise, whereas the notion of effort that has been used thus far is applicable in a much wider array of circumstances.

attempting to concentrate on a difficult task or to lift a heavy object for a lengthy period of time. The struggle to maintain a resolution in such circumstances is importantly different from what occurs when one makes a decision amongst a variety of mundane options or simply acts in light of one's strongest desire and, if Holton is right, it is omitted by the Humean Account of action precisely because the account explains action only in terms of beliefs and desires, where one acts on whichever desire is strongest.

How might we explain this kind of struggle? Holton suggests that we might augment the Humean Account along the lines suggested by proponents of the Modified Humean Account of action. In so doing, intentions are understood to be neither desires nor a conjunction of desires and beliefs, but as a unique kind of mental state, irreducible to the other two. Intentions are motivating states that can move one to act and that can preserve the motivational force of an earlier belief or desire, even if the earlier belief or desire is no longer present to mind, and even if there are contrary desires urging one to do otherwise. On this account, a resolution can be seen as a particular kind of intention that one forms precisely so as to defeat any contrary desires that might emerge at a later point in time.

It is worth emphasizing the ways in which this Modified Account of a resolution differs from that offered by proponents of the Humean Account. On the Modified Account, the number of motivational factors is enlarged, so that to be motivated to act, one need not require a desire and a belief, and action need not be the result of whichever desire is the strongest. An intention can exert its own kind of motivational force, so that even in the absence of the desire or belief that gave rise to it in the first place, the intention can overcome whatever desires are present at the time of action. Rather than saying that one acts always to satisfy one's strongest desire, the Modified Account claims

that one acts always in light of one's strongest motivational factor, which includes one's beliefs, desires, and intentions. Thus, when an agent adheres to the dictates of a resolution, the resolution itself is the strongest motivational factor.

Holton thinks that the Modified Humean Account of action is in trouble for the same reason that he thinks that the original Humean Account is problematic. The trouble is that both accounts omit a crucial element that is present in many cases where one adheres to the dictates of a resolution: namely, the *struggle* required when forcing oneself to remain resolute in the face of a desire to the contrary. The Modified Account of a resolution construes success in such cases in terms of the strength of a particular motivational factor, so that strength of will occurs when one *lets* the strongest of one's motivational factors have its way. Here, the struggle that can occur in situations where one displays of strength of will is simply missing. I shall say more about Holton's criticism below, after introducing his account of strength of will.

## 2. *Holton's Account of Strength of Will*

Holton thinks that the best way to explain strength of will is by introducing another motivational factor into the equation, namely, that of *will-power*.<sup>84</sup> Introducing the notion of will-power enables us to explain strength of will in terms of one's beliefs, desires, intentions *and* the strength of one's will-power, understood as a separate factor. According to Holton, the notion of will-power is that of a special cognitive capacity that the agent actively employs as such, and it can be likened to a muscle, insofar as it requires a distinctive kind of effort to use, it can tire in the short term, and it can be

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<sup>84</sup> Holton employs the notion of will-power in a different way from that used in the earlier chapters of this dissertation. This will become clear in the text.

strengthened over time. Explaining strength of will in terms of a distinctive notion of will-power incorporates the fact that often times one must struggle in order to resist the temptation of a compelling desire that threatens to subvert one's resolution. The struggle itself is something that one does or does not exert, and Holton claims that it is required *because* one is actively employing one's will-power in the attempt to overcome a desire to the contrary. That is, the struggle is evidence that one is using a distinctive cognitive capacity to remain resolute in the presence of a desire to do otherwise.

According to Holton, the struggle to resist a compelling desire is not straightforwardly physical, such as that involved when lifting a heavy object or walking uphill, since it can be present whether the resolution is to perform an action, such as going for a jog around the park, or to refrain from performing an action, such as drinking a cup of coffee. No matter how strong the desire to drink the cup of coffee might be, it is not the case that the struggle to resist it consists in actually preventing muscles that are straining to reach for the cup. Crucially, for Holton, the struggle involved in resisting a desire that threatens to thwart a resolution is not physical, but *mental*. In particular, it is the mental act of *refusing* to revise a resolution by not reconsidering it, in spite of the presence of a powerful inclination to do just that.<sup>85</sup> The state of mind in question is one in which the agent is *aware* of the resolution, and perhaps even the consideration(s) for which it was originally adopted, but it is not reconsidered or reevaluated. One merely calls it to mind in a kind of passive *rehearsal*, and one does not allow oneself to embark on a procedure that would be involved in revising it. Here, one must struggle in order to call to mind the resolution at precisely the moment

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<sup>85</sup> For Holton, the difference between the *reconsideration* of a resolution and the *revision* of a resolution is this: to revise a resolution is to alter it in some way; to reconsider a resolution is to suspend it and thereby open oneself to the possibility of revising it. In order to *refuse* to reconsider a resolution and thereby to abide by its dictates in the presence of a compelling desire to do otherwise, Holton thinks that one must actively exercise this distinct cognitive capacity.

at which it is being threatened by a competing inclination to do otherwise. When all goes well, one is able to resist the tempting course of action *by* refusing to revise and reconsider a resolution designed to prohibit that very course of action.<sup>86</sup> Thus, strength of will is the ability to retain a firm and unwavering commitment to one's resolution by calling the resolution to mind at the moment in time when it is needed and refusing to reconsider or alter it in any way.

What evidence is there that such a distinct capacity exists? Holton provides three pieces of evidence that the capacity is distinct, each from recent research in social psychology. First, the ability to *abide by* a resolution looks to be affected by factors that are distinct from the beliefs, desires, and resolutions themselves. For example, reformed alcoholics, dieters, and people who are trying to quit smoking are more likely to forgo their commitment to abstaining from alcohol, food, or cigarettes when they are depressed, anxious, or tired.<sup>87</sup> States of this kind systematically affect one's ability to act in line with *all* of one's resolutions, be they resolutions not to drink, not to over-eat, not to smoke, or whatever. According to Holton, the most likely explanation of this fact is that such states do not systematically strengthen one's desires to perform the prohibited actions, but rather they inhibit one's ability to follow any resolution that one might have formed.

Second, it appears that will-power is limited. For example, forcing oneself to eat radishes rather than chocolate makes one less likely to persist later on in solving a difficult puzzle, and suppressing one's emotional reactions to a film makes one less likely to persist later on in

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<sup>86</sup> Holton does not put the point precisely in this way, but I think it is the most perspicuous way to do so. As I shall argue below, this aspect of Holton's account of strength of will is problematic.

<sup>87</sup> Holton cites Roy Baumeister, Todd F. Heatherton, and Dianne M. Tice, *Losing Control: How and Why People Fail at Self-Regulation* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1994) pp. 151ff.

maintaining one's grip on a handle.<sup>88</sup> According to Holton, the most likely explanation of such facts is that the ability to sustain a resolution is affected by the strength of one's will-power at that moment in time. That is, it seems that the ability to persist in a course of action is determined not simply by the strength of one's desires, beliefs, and resolutions, but also by the strength of one's will-power, precisely that motivational factor that appears to be depleted by repeated or earlier use.

Third, it seems that the capacity can be developed and strengthened by repeated practice. Experimental subjects who undergo a regime of self-regulatory exercises, such as working on the improvement of posture, display a significantly reduced tendency to suffer from depletion of will-power.<sup>89</sup> Much like Aristotle's claim that one can become virtuous by acting virtuously, it appears that one can become strong-willed by acting in precisely that way.

As Holton himself admits, such evidence does not conclusively prove that such a capacity exists, but I think he is correct to suggest that it provides additional and compelling grounds to think that there is a distinct cognitive capacity that is employed when remaining steadfast in the face of compelling desires to violate a resolution. Indeed, postulating the existence of such a capacity does seem to hold the most promise for explaining the distinctive kind of struggle that is displayed in cases where an agent acts in this kind of strong-willed manner. At present, both the original Humean Account and the Modified version simply do not have the resources for explaining the struggle that an agent might have to exert when overcoming a strong desire that threatens to

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<sup>88</sup> Here, Holton cites empirical literature on what is called "ego depletion". See Roy Baumeister, Ellen Bratslavsky, Mark Muraven, and Dianne M. Tice, "Ego-Depletion: Is the Active Self a Limited Resource?" in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Volume 74, Number 5, May 1998, pp. 1252-65.

<sup>89</sup> Holton cites Mark Muraven, Roy Baumeister, and Dianne M. Tice, "Longitudinal Improvement of Self-Regulation Through Practice: Building Self-Control Strength Through Repeated Exercise", *The Journal of Social Psychology*, Volume 139, Number 4, August 1999, pp. 446-57.

undermine a resolution. Both depict the strong-willed agent in an impoverished way, omitting a crucial feature of action that seems present in many different situations.

Moreover, says Holton, once we include the notion of will-power in our account of action, as well as the relative strength and general success with which particular agents are able to employ it, we make further resources available when attempting to predict and make intelligible the actions that we perform. For example, knowing that a particular agent tends to be strong-willed allows us to better understand the actions that she performs and to predict with better accuracy those that she might be able to perform on future occasions. In general, it seems quite obvious that agents who are strong-willed are more likely to stick with their resolutions and other intentions in the face of temptation, and agents who are weak-willed are less likely to do so. This information is crucial, though, as it seems to be unavailable simply by knowing what the agent believes, desires, and intends or resolves to do. That is, knowing such information does not seem to help us understand the likelihood that the agent will be successful in realizing her intentions or resolutions. Knowing that the agent in question tends to be strong-willed provides exactly the kind of information that we need.

Although Holton has raised an important and successful criticism of both the Humean and the Modified Humean Accounts of action, his own explanation of strength of will is not without its difficulties. As we shall see in the next section, the trouble for Holton is twofold. First, he does not adequately explain *how* the act of bringing a resolution to awareness and refusing to alter it in the presence of a compelling desire to the contrary can enable an agent to overcome that desire, and, second, in a sense to be described below, he conceives of will-power in an *unnecessarily intellectual* manner.



### 3. *Problems for Holton*

Before attempting to criticize the account offered by Holton, let's clarify what has been said thus far. According to Holton, if both the Modified and original Humean Accounts are correct, then an agent must always act on the strongest of his motivational factors, be that a belief, a desire, a resolution, or some combination thereof. The trouble is that, on both accounts, whenever an agent is presented with a compelling desire to perform a particular action, the persistent strength of that motivational factor will overpower all other such factors, provided that it is the strongest motivational factor at that moment in time. For example, in the imagined situation above, the agent's desire to drink the available cup of coffee is felt *more powerfully* than his desire to refrain from doing so. This is precisely what causes the potential for trouble. Thus, we might describe his state of mind as follows, whether he would do so or not: "I *really want* this coffee, but I *also want* to avoid drinking it, so as not to contravene my resolution." This description is intended to capture the fact that, at that moment in time, although he is aware of his resolution, he does *not* feel the pull of a desire to remain steadfast in light of the opportunity to drink the coffee; if he were to follow the impulse of his strongest motivational factor, he would drink the coffee. Both the Modified and original Humean Accounts flounder because they imply that in situations of this kind the agent in question will not be able to act in any way except that which is suggested by the strongest motivational factor. That is, there is no room in such cases for the possibility of strength of will, situations where an agent endures the potential discomfort of not satisfying his immediate, most compelling motivational impulse so as to adhere to a resolution.

Holton wants to ensure that there is room for the kind of struggle that an agent can exert in the face of a compelling desire that threatens to contravene a resolution. To explain this notion of struggle, Holton suggests that we introduce another motivational factor into the mix, namely, the distinct notion of will-power, a cognitive capacity the use of which by the agent enables him to refuse to reconsider or alter the relevant resolution. In addition to the evidence culled from recent work in social psychology, the fact that one must struggle in cases of this kind suggests that the agent is employing a distinctive cognitive capacity to remain resolute in the presence of persistent and compelling urges to the contrary, a capacity that is not part of either the original Humean or Modified Humean Account of action. If Holton is correct, how might we explain situations like the one imagined above? Recall that our imagined agent's desire to drink the cup of coffee is felt *more powerfully* than his desire to refrain from doing so. This is precisely what causes the potential for trouble. When he does not drink the coffee and thereby manages to adhere to his resolution, his ability to overcome that temptation cannot be explained in terms of the triumph of the motivational factor that exerts the strongest pull on him. Indeed, we might say that he *ignores* that factor, enduring any potential discomfort associated with not satiating the compelling desire, in respect for, or in honor of, the resolution. His ability to do so is not merely an ability to form or entertain a belief, desire, resolution or some combination thereof, but it is something else. As Holton describes it, it is a refusal to alter a resolution, to resist changing one's mind and persist in spite of the opportunity to do otherwise, and, ultimately, an ability to triumph in the face of motivational difficulty. If Holton is correct, this ability is best explained by postulating the existence of a distinct cognitive capacity that enables an agent to do precisely this sort of thing.

I agree that Holton has provided compelling grounds to think that neither the Humean nor Modified Humean Account of action can explain such cases where an agent displays strength of will.<sup>90</sup> I also agree that in order to explain those and similar cases, we should introduce the notion of a distinct faculty of will-power that each agent utilizes when remaining steadfast in the face of forceful and unrelenting motivational impulses that threaten to undermine a resolution.<sup>91</sup> As Holton correctly points out, introducing the notion of will-power in our account of action, and the relative strength and general success with which particular agents are able to employ that capacity, makes available further resources that better enable us to predict and make intelligible the actions that we perform. Knowing that a particular agent tends to be strong-willed allows us to better understand the actions that she performs and to predict with better accuracy those that she might be able to perform on future occasions. This kind of information helps us to understand the likelihood that the agent will be successful in realizing her resolutions and other intentions, and knowing that the agent in question tends to be strong- or weak-willed provides exactly the kind of information that we need.

According to Holton, though, the struggle involved in resisting a desire that threatens to thwart a resolution is not physical, but *mental*. In particular, it is the mental act of refusing to revise a resolution by not reconsidering it, in spite of the presence of a powerful inclination to do just that. The state of mind in question is one in which the agent is aware of the resolution, and perhaps even the consideration(s) for which it was originally adopted, but it is not reconsidered or reevaluated.

One merely calls it to mind, in a kind of passive rehearsal, and one does not allow oneself to embark

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<sup>90</sup> Indeed, insofar as both accounts are instances of the standard story of action, I argued as much in the previous chapter.

<sup>91</sup> However, as I argued in the previous chapters of this dissertation, I think that will-power is best understood as a uniquely *causal power*, whereas Holton understands will-power as a distinct cognitive capacity. I will exploit this difference when I criticize the account that Holton offers.

on a procedure that would be involved in revising it. Here, effort is required in order to call to mind the resolution at precisely the moment at which it is being threatened by a competing inclination to do otherwise. When all goes well, one is able to resist the tempting course of action by calling to mind the resolution and *refusing* to revise and reconsider it in the face of temptation to do otherwise, such that strength of will is understood as the ability to retain a firm and unwavering commitment to one's resolution by calling the resolution to mind at the moment in time when it is needed and refusing to reconsider it.

Although the account of strength of will presented by Holton is most definitely on the right track insofar as he acknowledges the need to account for the kind of struggle that an agent must sometimes exert in such circumstances, there are two related reasons that render his account problematic. The first concerns the description that Holton provides of the *causal process* by which strength of will occurs in the kind of case introduced above. The second concerns the applicability of Holton's account of strength of will to cases where the relevant action is *already underway*, given that he conceives of will-power as a cognitive capacity. Let's examine each in turn.<sup>92</sup>

First, Holton says very little about how we are to understand the mental action of refusal and its *causal role* in enabling the agent to overcome the powerful desire that threatens to undermine that resolution and thus to refrain from performing the relevant action. In particular, Holton does not specify *why* the strong-willed agent must recall the resolution and actively refuse to revise it as part of the process by which he overcomes the pernicious desire. As a result, we are left wondering (1) what precise causal role or *function* the act of refusal plays when an agent displays strength of will and (2)

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<sup>92</sup> It is important to note that there are interesting normative issues related to strength of will, such as whether there are conditions in which it would be *inappropriate* for an agent to adhere to a resolution, say, that I shall here set aside. My worries with the account that Holton offers concern only its *causal* dimension.

why overcoming the potentially threatening desire should involve a refusal to revise the resolution *rather than*, say, a refusal to perform the action that would satisfy that desire.

For instance, Holton does not specify whether refusing to alter the resolution thereby increases its relative motivational force, or whether it diminishes the relative motivational force of the problematic desire, or whether it functions in another way. As a result, we are left wondering whether for the strong-willed agent, the act of recalling the resolution and refusing to alter it *makes* that resolution stronger than the threatening desire, or whether that act *suppresses* the motivational force of the threatening desire without affecting that of the resolution, or something else entirely. And if the acts of recall and refusal do function in one of these ways, *how* do they enable the agent to refrain from performing an action that would satisfy the threatening desire? After all, it seems possible that an agent might recall a resolution while in the presence of a potent desire to the contrary, refuse to alter that resolution in any way, and nevertheless perform an action that satisfies the pernicious desire. From a *causal* perspective, what might explain the difference between such cases and cases where after refusing to alter his resolution the agent succeeds in overcoming the desire by refraining from performing the relevant action? The account that Holton offers suggests only that strong-willed agents tend to be capable of refusing to alter their resolutions in such cases, but this does not illuminate or explain the causal process by which refusing to alter a resolution can enable an agent to refrain from performing the relevant action. As a result, we are left wanting an explanation of the difference between cases where an agent succeeds and cases where an agent fails to refrain from performing the relevant action after refusing to alter his resolution, from the perspective of the causal factors or processes at work. I shall return to this point below.

In addition, Holton does not say whether an agent who overcomes a potentially threatening desire can do so not by refusing to change his mind but by refusing to perform the relevant action. Using the case of our imaginary coffee drinker, why should overcoming the potent desire to drink the freshly brewed cup of coffee require of the agent that he refuse to alter his resolution? There are other ways in which the agent might overcome the threatening desire, ways that Holton does not consider. For example, we might imagine the following: upon realizing that he very strongly desires to drink the coffee in front of him and reminding himself that doing so would violate his resolution to avoid drinking coffee, the agent becomes acutely aware that his desire for coffee is felt more powerfully than his resolution, and so he undergoes a brief struggle, momentarily oscillating back and forth, as it were, between his options, after which he thinks to himself “No! I shall not drink this coffee!” and he does just that. Here, *pace* Holton, there is no need for the agent to perform the mental act of refusing to reconsider or revise his resolution. Instead, the agent refuses to perform an action that would satisfy that desire, namely, he refrains from drinking the contents of the cup in front of him. Holton has not specified why the strong-willed agent must recall the resolution *and* actively refuse to revise it as part of the process by which he overcomes the influence of the pernicious desire. Since this additional stage in the process by which the agent overcomes his desire to drink coffee is not obviously required, Holton owes an explanation of why he thinks it is.<sup>93</sup>

Now, the second reason why the account of strength of will offered by Holton is problematic is that it is not clear that it can explain cases where an agent displays strength of will by persisting in

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<sup>93</sup> To clarify: for Holton, the desire to drink coffee tempts the agent *to give up his prior resolution* rather than *to perform the action in question*. My claim in the text above is that there are other ways of understanding what happens in cases of this kind, where we assume only that the desire to drink the coffee is just that: not a desire to change one’s mind, but a desire to imbibe that substance. The difference here might be subtle but it is important, since it suggests that Holton assumes that if our imaginary coffee drinker overcomes his desire, his doing so must be caused by the mental act of refusal. I am claiming that the mental act of refusal is a potentially *unnecessary* step in the process by which the agent overcomes his desire, so Holton owes an explanation of why it plays this role.

the performance of an action that is *already underway*. That is to say, Holton's account seems designed to explain only those cases where an agent has resolved to *refrain* from performing a particular action that he is then later tempted to enact, such as in the case imagined above, in which the agent has resolved to refrain from drinking coffee. But there are other kinds of circumstances in which we want to say that an agent has displayed strength of will. Imagine a situation in which a marathon runner is nearing the completion of the penultimate mile of the race and is confronted with a very strong desire to give up.<sup>94</sup> Here, one is *already* embarked on a particular course of action that one has resolved to continue, but one is confronted with a compelling inclination to stop. Does Holton's account of strength of will apply in cases of this kind? Is it reasonable to think that, in order to avoid succumbing to temptation in such situations, one must struggle to recall and rehearse the prior resolution while refusing to embark on a procedure to revise it? That is, does it make sense to say that strength of will functions in such cases when one calls to mind the resolution and remains steadfast in commitment to it, so as to resist the tempting course of action? In such cases, Holton might describe the imaginary agent's state of mind as follows, whether the agent would do so or not: "The pain in my legs is intense and I am nearly exhausted to the point of collapse, but I am resolved to finishing this race. I shall not change my mind, in spite of the discomfort of not doing so." This description is intended to capture the fact that Holton would describe the agent as feeling a tremendously powerful urge to change his mind and give up on his previous resolution, which the agent avoids doing precisely by rehearsing the resolution and refusing to alter it in any way.

But this is where things get tricky. In the imagined scenario in which one is *already* embarked on a particular course of action and confronted with a potent desire to stop doing so, it

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<sup>94</sup> I introduced a similar example in chapter two, when undermining the standard story of action.

seems that there is something missing from Holton's account of strength of will. It seems that in cases of this kind, the strong-willed agent must do something in addition to merely remaining steadfast in his thoughts and refusing to alter his resolution. The agent must *continue running* through the pain and exhaustion, and doing so is clearly neither automatic nor merely habitual and involves a significant amount of effort on the part of the agent. The agent might continue to run while rehearsing his resolution in much the way that Holton describes, by calling to mind the resolution and refusing to embark on a procedural revision of it, but the mental action of refusing to revise the resolution does not appear to be *sufficient* to explain the fact that he continues to run through the pain. Why not?

Recall a point that was mentioned above, in the case of the imaginary coffee drinker: it seems possible that an agent in such circumstances might recall a resolution while being tempted by a potent desire to the contrary, refuse to alter that resolution in any way, and nevertheless perform an action that satisfies the problematic desire. From a *causal* perspective, Holton's account does not explain the difference between such cases and cases where after refusing to alter his resolution the agent refrains from performing the relevant action and thereby succeeds in overcoming the desire to drink coffee. Something is missing from Holton's account. Similarly, in the case of the marathon runner, the agent in question might continue to run through the pain and near exhaustion while recalling his resolution and refusing to revise it in any way, or the agent might recall the resolution and refuse to revise it and then stop running the race. Again, from a causal perspective, Holton's account does not enable us to explain the difference between such cases. Something has been omitted.



I suggest that what is missing is the distinctively active and causal contribution of the agent during the performance of his own actions. In order for the agent to overcome the desire to give up and to continue running the race and thereby display strength of will, he must do more than perform the mental action of refusing to revise or reconsider his resolution. He must also exert a great amount of effort so as to force his legs to remain in motion in spite of the pain, exhaustion, and the desire to stop running the race.<sup>95</sup> Crucially, the effort required to sustain and control the relevant bodily capacities in such demanding scenarios is *different* from that required to refuse to change one's mind or alter one's resolution. The effort required in order to continue running is different insofar as it is deployed in a distinctively bodily manner, used to sustain the ongoing activation of the requisite bodily capacities, and such effort is not accounted for by Holton's description of what happens when an agent displays strength of will. For instance, we might describe the marathon runner's state of mind as follows, whether he would do so or not: "I have resolved to finish this race, but right now the pain in my legs is intense, I am very tired, and I desperately want to quit. In fact, I want to stop running more so than to continue." If the account of strength of will offered by Holton is correct, in order to overcome the potent desire to stop running the race, the marathon runner must recall his resolution and refuse to revise or alter it in any way. In such circumstances, we might continue describing his state of mind as follows: "I have resolved to finish this race! I refuse to change my mind!" If the marathon runner is sufficiently strong-willed in the manner Holton that would describe it, then by refusing to revise his resolution he can overcome the desire to stop running. But herein is the problem: from a causal perspective, how does the mental action of refusing to revise his resolution *keep his legs in motion* while he struggles to overcome the pain and near exhaustion? Displaying strength of will in cases of this kind

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<sup>95</sup> The notion of action that I am about to employ in the text was introduced and defended in chapter one.

requires that the agent continue to perform the relevant bodily action moments prior to recalling the resolution, as well as the moment that his newly acquired desire to stop running is felt more powerfully than his resolution to continue, and even as he refuses to alter his resolution. This way of displaying strength of will is not explained by Holton's account, since Holton restricts the notion of will-power in an unnecessarily intellectual manner by construing it as a cognitive capacity that the agent employs specifically when refusing to alter a resolution in light of a desire that suggests that he do just that.

Once we see the importance of the agent and the active, causal relation that he can have with his own bodily capacities during the performance of an action, we can provide a more persuasive and comprehensive account of strength of will. What explains the difference between situations in which an agent remains steadfast in the face of a powerful desire that threatens to subvert a resolution and cases in which the agent fails to do so is not merely that the agent becomes aware of the resolution, rehearses it in the way that Holton describes, and then refuses to alter it. When confronted with a compelling desire to alter a resolution, the agent's act of reminding himself of that very resolution can be a part of the process by which he overcomes a potent desire to the contrary, and this can require a distinctive kind of effort on his part, namely, that of remaining steadfast in his thoughts. But the activity of bringing the resolution to awareness and refusing to alter it is simply not sufficient for causally initiating and controlling the requisite bodily capacities in the manner demanded by the resolution. In fact, the resolution itself, just like any other motivational factor, is not causally responsible for this. The agent himself is, inasmuch as through the exertion of effort he causally initiates the activation of his own bodily capacities in light of the demands of the resolution that he has called to mind.

Notice that on both the original and Modified Humean Accounts, there is no way that we can explain the active and causal relation in which an agent can stand with his own bodily capacities during the performance of an action.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, for the proponent of the Humean and Modified Humean Accounts of action, the explanation of action requires that we refer only to *the states of mind* in which such motivational factors are salient to the agent, rather than to the agent himself. Indeed, the connection between both Humean Accounts and the philosophical commitments of David Hume himself are particularly relevant here.<sup>97</sup> Famously, Hume denied that there was any such thing as the agent (or “the self”), in addition to the states of mind (or “perceptions of the mind”) that are present to awareness at any given moment in time, connected by what he described as the Principles of Association. It seems that contemporary proponents of both Humean Accounts retain an inexplicit commitment to such a picture of the agent. By highlighting the active and causal role of the agent in cases where one displays strength of will in overcoming an urge that threatens to undermine the action that one is in the midst of performing, the assumption that we need not refer to this contribution of the agent in our explanation of action seems to be problematic, to say the least.

Unfortunately, the account of strength of will offered by Holton does not fare much better. Although I disagree with the details of his account, Holton nevertheless recognizes a distinctive and active role for the agent, a role that is made explicit by cases in which an agent displays strength of will, as Holton describes that notion. For Holton, by recalling a resolution without revising or reevaluating it, the agent becomes aware of the resolution at precisely the moment when doing so is

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<sup>96</sup> I raised a very similar point in the previous chapter.

<sup>97</sup> See his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1739-40/1975), p. 252.

required and, when all goes well, is thereby able to overcome a compelling desire to the contrary. But this places severe limitations on the active role of the agent during the performance of bodily actions, especially in cases where what Holton describes as strength of will is not required. That is, it is only in cases where the agent must intervene, so to speak, and overcome the force of a potent desire, that we see a distinctively active role for the agent during the performance of an action. For Holton, when strength of will is not required, the strongest motivational factor itself causes the action that the agent performs. This can be understood as a commitment to a kind of *psychological determinism*, in which bodily actions are causally determined by an agent's beliefs, desires, intentions, and other such motivational factors, rather than the agent himself.<sup>98</sup> It is the commitment to this claim that is the most problematic aspect of Holton's account of strength of will.

#### 4. *Concluding Remarks and Looking Ahead*

In this chapter, I have presented and defended Richard Holton's novel criticism of both the Humean and the Modified Humean Accounts of action, and claimed that, although headed in the right direction, the positive account of strength of will offered by Holton requires emendation. In particular, I argued that, on Holton's account of strength of will, we are left wanting an explanation of how, exactly, an agent increases the motivational efficacy of a resolution simply by bringing it to awareness without revision or reevaluation, and that Holton's account does not appear applicable to cases where an agent resists a strong desire that threatens to undermine the action that he is in the midst of performing and has resolved to complete. When we limit our conception of will-power to

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<sup>98</sup> Note that "*psychological determinism*" is distinct from "*physical determinism*", the latter of which is a claim that some physicists and metaphysicists are in the business of investigating.

the kinds of cases that Holton considers, we limit ourselves to thinking of will-power in unnecessarily intellectual terms, as a cognitive capacity limited to the mental action of refusing to revise or alter a resolution. In response to these difficulties, I suggested that what's missing from the account of strength of will presented by Holton is the distinctively active contribution of the agent in causally initiating, sustaining, and controlling the activation of the relevant capacities during the performance of an action, a contribution which is especially manifest in cases where an agent displays strength of will in overcoming a potent desire that threatens to undermine a prior resolution.

In the next chapter, I introduce and defend an account of mental action that builds upon the alternative account of agent causation presented in chapter one. My defense will come by way of critical engagement with an account of mental action defended by Galen Strawson. I shall argue that although Strawson is partially correct to claim that an agent can catalytically initiate a mental event in which content becomes present to conscious awareness, his positive account of mental action is problematic, for two related reasons. First, I shall suggest that his account employs a controversial notion of action that is assumed to be true without an explicit argument in defense thereof, and that there are plausible alternative conceptions of action that do not restrict mental action in the way suggested by Strawson. Second, I shall claim (a) that Strawson's account obscures the relation in which the agent can stand with the activation of his own cognitive capacities during the performance of a mental action and (b) that *pace* Strawson, the mental action of catalytic initiation itself is plausibly one that the agent can cause through the exertion of effort required to initiate the activation of the relevant cognitive capacities.

After undermining Strawson's account, I shall present an alternative account of mental action that develops out of the account of agent causation defended in chapter one. I will suggest that *effort* plays a causal role in the performance of mental action, such that through the exertion of effort the agent causally activates and employs his cognitive capacities, both in cases where he catalytically initiates a mental event in which content becomes present to conscious awareness and in cases where he sustains the ongoing activation of a cognitive capacity. Crucially, I will argue that during the ongoing performance of a mental action, the agent stands in an *active* relation with his own cognitive capacities as he continually sustains their activation or manipulates the manner in which they are activating, and that we understand the notion of effort and the agent's exertion thereof using a terminological distinction found in Aristotle, between two different ways in which a capacity can be activated. The exertion of effort by the agent is a form of *energetic* activation of the faculty of will-power, which when active is complete insofar as it is not the development of a process from a state of potentiality towards a state of actuality, but is a blindly causal power that in normal conditions where all goes well *kinetically* activates the relevant cognitive capacities. I will end by suggesting that if the alternative account of mental action presented here is correct, there is good reason for us to revise a number of fundamental assumptions that are operative within contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of mind and action and thereby expand our repertoire of conceptual resources, illuminating the basic form of control that an agent can exert over his own cognitive capacities during the performance of a mental action and the active and passive relations in which an agent can stand with his own cognitive capacities, relations that are otherwise obscured when we focus exclusively upon mental states, events, and processes and the causal and functional relations between them.



## *Chapter Four*

### *Mental Action and Agency*

In conscious mental life, there is an important distinction between those mental events that merely happen to an agent, and those mental actions that are performed by the agent in question. For instance, images spontaneously present themselves to conscious awareness, oftentimes unbidden and on a repeated basis throughout a given period of time; sudden and unexpected external environmental stimuli distract and interfere with the task at hand, pulling attention away from its target; habitual patterns of thought frequently emerge for no obvious reason, lingering before conscious awareness, providing ample opportunity for pursuit and further exploration; and addictive impulses, desires, and other motivational factors threaten to overwhelm. In contrast, other situations involve the performance of mental actions by the agent, such as when one is imagining the appearance of a long-lost friend, directing the focal point of attention, recalling the lyrics to a cherished song, or ignoring a tempting thought or desire. How shall we explain this distinction? And how shall we explain what occurs when an agent performs a mental action?

My goal in this chapter is to provide an account of mental action that enables us to explain this distinction.<sup>99</sup> I shall argue that mental action can be understood in terms of the exertion of effort that is required to initiate, sustain, and control the activation of one's own cognitive capacities.

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<sup>99</sup> The topic of mental action has received too little attention in contemporary work in Anglo-American philosophy of mind and action. Notable exceptions include the essays in Lucy O'Brien and Matthew Soteriou, eds., *Mental Actions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Andrei A. Buckareff, "Mental Overpopulation and Mental Action: Protecting Intentions From Mental Birth Control" in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 37, Number 1, March 2007, pp. 49-65, and "How (Not) To Think About Mental Action" in *Philosophical Explorations*, Volume 8, Issue 1, March 2005, pp. 83-89; Christopher Peacocke, "Mental Action and Self-Awareness (I)" in Brian McLaughlin and Jonathan D. Cohen, eds., *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 358-376; Joëlle Proust, "A Plea for Mental Acts" in *Synthese*, Volume 129, Number 1, October 2001, pp. 105-128; and Galen Strawson, "Mental Ballistics Or The Involuntariness of Spontaneity" in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Volume 103, Issue 1, June 2003, pp. 227-256.



The exertion of effort exploits a distinctive causal power that the agent alone possesses and employs, what in the previous chapters of this dissertation I have called the faculty of will-power. The account of mental action that I defend provides a principled way in which we can distinguish between those mental events that have been brought about and controlled by the agent and those that have not, by referring to the effort that an agent exerts in order to use the relevant cognitive capacities.

The chapter has three sections. In the first, I discuss Galen Strawson's claim that the role of mental action in conscious mental life is restricted to what he calls "mental ballistics".<sup>100</sup> After presenting Strawson's view, I argue that while the account of mental action that he offers is partially correct, it fails to capture the full extent of our powers of agency within the domain of the mental, since it employs an unduly restrictive conception of action. In the second section, I present and defend an account of mental action couched in terms of the cognitive capacities that an agent possesses and utilizes through the exertion of effort. In the final section, I suggest that in light of the account of mental action offered here, there is good reason to revise a number of fundamental commitments in the metaphysics of mind and action, including the prevalent assumption that conscious mental life can be adequately understood exclusively in terms of such notions as states, events, and processes, and the causal and functional relations between them.

As in the previous chapters of this dissertation, it is important to note at the outset that the notions of freedom, determinism, and moral responsibility will not be at issue in what follows. The goal is not that of articulating the conditions under which a given mental action is or is not within the power of an agent to perform in the sense relevant to the notion of freedom and the evaluation

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<sup>100</sup> See his *ibid.* pp. 227-256. The phrase "mental ballistics" appears on page 241.

of moral responsibility.<sup>101</sup> Instead, the goal is to offer an account of mental action that is sensible on its own terms, regardless of any possible relations with the notions of freedom, determinism, and moral responsibility.

In addition, I will not take a stand on a variety of issues that are important in philosophy of mind, most particularly the so-called mind-body problem and the existence of non-conscious mental states, processes, events, etc. Rather, I shall assume that no consensus among philosophers and scientists has yet been reached regarding the (modal, causal, constitutive, etc.) relations that obtain between cognitive capacities and bodily capacities, and that we can understand mental action without also understanding non-conscious mental phenomena or the role that such phenomena might play in mental action, thereby restricting what follows to the notion of conscious mental life and the mental actions the occurrence of which the agent is aware.<sup>102</sup>

### 1. *Strawson on Mental Ballistics*

According to Strawson, mental action is restricted to the catalytic initiation of a mental event in which content<sup>103</sup> is delivered into consciousness. In essence, Strawson's idea is that when content is

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<sup>101</sup> For example, I shall not discuss the notion of "doxastic freedom" or the question of whether an agent can be free when choosing, believing, or judging. For recent discussion of such issues, see, for example, Matthew Boyle, "Making up Your Mind' and the Activity of Reason" in *Philosophers' Imprint*, Volume 11, Number 17, December 2011, pp. 1-24, and "Active Belief", forthcoming in David Hunter, ed., *Belief and Agency: Canadian Journal of Philosophy Supplemental Volume* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2012), and Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder, "Deliberation and Acting for Reasons" in *Philosophical Review*, Volume 121, Number 2, April 2012, pp. 209-239.

<sup>102</sup> Mental actions of which the agent is aware are those that the agent could report, given the appropriate conditions, in the form "I am now imagining, judging, choosing, etc., such-and-so". Note that the same type of awareness can be present when what is occurring is not a mental action, such as when an agent is aware that a particular content is present to consciousness in the form of a sudden recollection of some fact of the matter.

<sup>103</sup> The notion of "content" to be employed here is neutral regarding the question of whether content should be understood "internally", "externally", or through some combination thereof, and is general enough to include visual,

delivered into consciousness, what occurs is a mental event that is not itself a mental action, since the content that is present to mind has in no way been assembled or constructed by that very mental event. Thus, says Strawson, if there is to be any such thing as mental action, it is restricted to the catalytic initiation of the process that results in such content being delivered into consciousness. The catalytic initiation can take a variety of forms, including (1) *priming*, where the agent directs his mind at a particular problem and thereby sets in motion a mental event; (2) *shepherding*, where the agent brings his wandering mind back to the previous content to re-start or continue the previous sequence of thoughts; (3) *concentrating*, when the agent concentrates more carefully upon the relevant content; (4) *blanking*, where the agent initiates what Strawson describes as an actively receptive blanking of the mind so as to enable content to arise; and (5) *attending*, which occurs when the agent keeps his attention focused upon the particular content that is present to consciousness.<sup>104</sup> In each kind of case, the agent catalytically initiates a mental event in which content comes to mind as a result of that mental action. He summarizes the claim as follows:

“[N]o ordinary thinking of a particular thought-content, conscious or otherwise, is ever an action. No actual natural thinking of a thought, no actual having of a particular thought-content, is ever itself an action. Mental action in thought is restricted to the fostering of conditions hospitable to contents’ coming to mind. The coming to mind itself—the actual occurrence of thoughts, conscious or non-conscious, is not a matter of action.”<sup>105</sup>

The upshot, according to Strawson, is that mental action goes no farther than the catalytic initiation of the relevant mental event; the rest is *waiting* for content to come to mind.

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auditory, gustatory, sensory, etc., images as well as other potential “non-conceptual”, “purely phenomenological”, or “phenomenal” aspects as parts or features thereof.

<sup>104</sup> He discusses each kind of catalytic initiation in his *op. cit.*, pp. 231-232.

<sup>105</sup> See his *ibid.* p. 234.

Now, imagining, judging, choosing, and deciding are often cited as paradigmatic instances of mental action.<sup>106</sup> How might Strawson explain such occurrences, if not as genuine instances thereof? When referring specifically to imagination, Strawson claims that when an agent entertains imagined content, there is an important sense in which the entertaining thereof is not an action but “a kind of involuntary response that we are prone to experience as action, as something we do intentionally.”<sup>107</sup> One is prone to erroneously experience such events as mental actions, Strawson insists, because they occur involuntarily as a reflexive response to various stimuli and often occur without resistance. Moreover, the sustaining and developing of what the agent imagines can involve mental action, says Strawson, but only of the catalytic, initiating kind: “Although the sustaining or facilitation of what happens may again involve catalytic action, the imaginative content itself is, again, up to one’s Muse, given that it is something over and above any explicitly cognitively prefigured content....To think that the actual content-issuing and content-entertaining that are the heart of imagining are themselves a matter of action seems like thinking, when one has thrown a dart, that the dart’s entering the dartboard is itself an action.”<sup>108</sup> In short, after the agent has initiated the mental event in question, the rest is a matter of mental ballistics.

When referring specifically to judgment-, choice-, and decision-making, Strawson claims that if we consider the mental goings-on that precede judgments, choices, and decisions, we shall see

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<sup>106</sup> See, for example, Christopher Peacocke’s *Being Known* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) for the claim that judging can be a mental action. For the claim that imagining can be a mental action, see Fabian Dorsch’s “Judging and the Scope of Mental Agency” in Lucy O’Brien and Matthew Soteriou, eds., *Mental Actions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 38-71. For the claim that deciding can be a mental action, see Alfred Mele’s “Mental Action: A Case Study” in *ibid.* pp. 17-37. And for the claim that choosing can be a mental action, see David Owen’s “Freedom and Practical Judgement” in *ibid.* pp. 121-137.

<sup>107</sup> See his *op. cit.*, p. 239.

<sup>108</sup> See his *ibid.* p. 242. I shall return to Strawson’s underlying conception of action in the text above.

that here, too, the role of genuine mental action is very restricted. At most, an agent can deliberately set his mind at the problem which requires that he make a judgment, choice, or decision, thereby focusing on the problem at hand, and such occurrences can be a matter of mental action in the form of catalytic initiation. But what follows, says Strawson, is here too nothing more than a matter of content becoming present to mind, which is a matter of a distinctively rational reflex, “[t]he movement of the natural causality of reason”.<sup>109</sup>

Before criticizing Strawson’s account of mental action, it is important to highlight the truth in what he is claiming. Strawson is correct to say that an agent can initiate a mental event in which content becomes present to mind as a result of this initiation, and that in such cases the content in question has not been assembled or constructed by that very act of initiation. In such cases, the agent comes to stand in a particular *relation* with the relevant content, a relation which can be described as “entertaining a thought”.<sup>110</sup> That is, after the agent has initiated the relevant mental event, the proper functioning of the relevant cognitive capacity or capacities present to mind the correct content.

But why, exactly, does Strawson restrict his account of mental action in the way that he does? There is a telling remark that Strawson offers when elaborating his account of mental action. He says that “the event of entertaining [content in thought] itself is not an action, any more than falling

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<sup>109</sup> See his *ibid.* p. 244. When using this expression, Strawson cites David Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1748/1999), specifically Section IX, entitled “Of the Reason of Animals”. I surmise that Strawson has in mind what Hume referred to as “the principles of association” among ideas, as that which explains which content becomes present to mind as a result of the catalytic initiation by the agent.

<sup>110</sup> To clarify: the relation here is akin to one way in which we might understand visual perception as a relation that obtains between the agent and an object, broadly construed. As Strawson himself says: “In many respects thinking is like seeing. Opening one’s eyes, turning one’s head in the direction of X, concentrating on the scene in the attempt to pick out X—all these things can be a matter of action, but seeing X can’t be.” See his *ibid.* p. 237.

is once one has jumped off a wall”.<sup>111</sup> The idea seems to be that, since falling to the ground occurs because of mechanical forces and factors over which the agent can exert no direct causal influence, falling cannot be an action that an agent performs. The agent merely *initiates* the event in which he falls, by jumping off the wall. An analogous case is this: when an agent throws a rock and it strikes and then shatters a nearby window, the action that the agent performs is merely the bodily movement described as “throwing the rock” and not the striking of the window and the subsequent shattering thereof, since the latter take place in conjunction with various mechanical forces and factors over which the agent can exert no direct causal influence. The catalytic initiation is the bodily movement described as “throwing the rock”, which then brings about an event in which the rock traverses a particular trajectory through space in an entirely ballistic manner, governed by the laws of mechanics. Thus, for Strawson, as far as the action that the agent performs is concerned, after the rock has been released, the rest is up to nature.

If we assume that this underlying ballistic conception of action-as-mere-catalytic-initiation of a subsequent non-action event is unproblematic, Strawson’s account of mental action seems reasonable. Indeed, it seems correct to say that when an agent entertains content in thought, a mental event occurs in which the relevant content is present to mind. The coming-to-mind of that content can be the *effect* or *result* of a mental action, the catalytic initiation of the relevant mental event. Once that event has been initiated by the agent, what happens next is—the relevant content simply comes to mind, according to what Strawson calls the natural causality of reason. As he says, “[w]hich particular content it is is not intentionally controlled; it is not a matter of action. It cannot

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<sup>111</sup> See his *ibid.* p. 235.

be a matter of action unless the content is already there, available for consideration and adoption for intentional production.”<sup>112</sup>

Unfortunately for Strawson, though, his underlying conception of action is highly controversial and not without its difficulties, and he does not provide an argument in defence thereof.<sup>113</sup> When describing this notion of action, Strawson cites the work of Donald Davidson, who once claimed that in the case of bodily action, the agent does nothing more than move his body; the rest is up to nature.<sup>114</sup> Thus, in the examples mentioned above, since Strawson assumes that when performing a bodily action the agent can do nothing more than move his body, the rationale for the restriction is the assumption that action is limited to just those movements of the body that the agent is able to bring about directly, without the mediation or intervention of nature.<sup>115</sup> Given this underlying conception of action, when applied to the case of mental action, Strawson assumes that the agent can do nothing more than catalytically initiate a process the result of which is a mental event wherein content becomes present to mind; after the initiation has occurred, the rest is up to the supposed natural causality of reason.

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<sup>112</sup> See his *ibid.* p. 235.

<sup>113</sup> The controversy surrounding this conception of action was widely discussed under the guise of the problem of “action-individuation”. See, for example, Alvin I. Goldman, “The Individuation of Action” in *Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 68, Number 21, November 1971, pp. 761-774, and Judith Jarvis Thompson, “Individuating Actions” in *ibid.* pp. 774-781.

<sup>114</sup> See Donald Davidson, “Agency” reprinted in his *Essays on Actions and Events*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 43-62.

<sup>115</sup> This is why Strawson says, in a footnote appended to a passage from Davidson, that there are reasons for drawing the line between the *actions* that an agent performs and what *merely happens* to the agent “further in” than Davidson supposes. Strawson supposes that the line might be drawn somewhere within the brain. See his *op. cit.*, p. 245, note 39. If this supposition is correct, then all action, whether bodily or mental, just is the catalytic initiation of a cerebral event which then brings about a further result or effect which cannot be the action in question. Note the similarity between this supposition by Strawson and the account of agent causation defended by Roderick Chisholm and discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. I shall return to the issue of agent causation in the next section.

But there are plausible alternative ways of understanding the notion of action. For example, an account of action inspired by the work of Elizabeth Anscombe would hold that when an agent jumps and falls to the ground, or throws a rock which then strikes and shatters a nearby window, the action in question is to be understood in terms of the *result* that the agent intends to bring about.<sup>116</sup> Thus, using the above examples, when falling to the ground is the successful intended result of jumping off the wall, the action in question is not restricted to the mere jumping movement but includes the falling to the ground; and when shattering the window is the successful intended result of the agent's throwing of the rock, the action in question is not restricted to the mere throwing movement but includes the hitting and shattering of the window. The actions can be identified as such in virtue of the agent's intention to bring about precisely those results *by* performing the bodily movements in question. That is, they are instrumental actions, ones in which an agent performs an action, *A*, by doing something else, *B*. In such cases, the required mediation of nature does not restrict the scope of the powers of agency, and the actions that an agent can perform are in no way limited to the catalytic initiation of a subsequent event. In a word, instrumental actions are genuine actions, regardless of the assistance of nature.

Since Strawson has provided no reason for us to accept his underlying notion of action rather than an alternative conception such as the one just sketched, we need not assume that mental action is restricted to the catalytic initiation of mental events, since we need not assume that actions are restricted to those events that an agent is able to bring about directly and without the mediation or intervention of nature. Indeed, given his underlying conception of action and his explicit focus on (a) the content that comes to mind during a mental event, (b) the role of the agent in making such an event occur, and (c) the relation that obtains between the agent in question and the content

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<sup>116</sup> See G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).



which appears before his mind, it seems that Strawson has overlooked a number of other *types* of mental action, especially those that do not involve the catalytic initiation of a mental event, at least according to Strawson's description thereof. I turn now to a discussion of these issues.

## 2. *Beyond Ballistics*

Before explaining the ways in which we can widen the range of admissible types of mental action beyond the merely catalytic initiation of a subsequent mental event, it is important to point out that the account of mental action presented by Strawson can be understood as employing a notion of agent causation. As Strawson describes it, catalytic initiation is a mental action that the agent brings about or performs directly, without the intermediation of nature or the natural causality of reason. Is the catalytic initiation something that the agent himself can *cause*? Consider again the manner in which Strawson elects to describe the five forms of catalytic initiation.<sup>117</sup> For instance, Strawson says that priming can be a mental action whereby an agent sets his mind at the problem at hand, perhaps by refreshing images of a scene or rehearsing inferential transitions; shepherding can be a mental action in which an agent brings his wandering mind back to the relevant content; concentrating can be a mental action that may involve tremendous effort; blanking can be a mental action in which an agent brings about a clearing of the mind by suppressing unwanted content; and attending can be a mental action whereby an agent directs and maintains the focal point of attention upon the relevant

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<sup>117</sup> See his *op. cit.*, pp. 231-232.

content. In each case of catalytic initiation, once the agent has performed the mental action in question, what happens next is that content becomes present to mind.<sup>118</sup>

But what of the mental action of catalytic initiation itself, as opposed to the subsequent mental event in which content comes to mind? Other than listing the variety of forms that he believes such action can take, Strawson says very little about how we should understand the mental action of catalytic initiation, and this is problematic. It is problematic because the correct account of mental action should ensure that when an agent performs a mental action, he does so while exercising *the right kind of control* over his performance thereof. That is, the correct account of mental action must provide a satisfactory description of the kind of *relation* in which the agent stands with his own cognitive capacities when performing simple and complex mental actions, in contrast to the relation in which the agent stands with his own cognitive capacities when they are activated without or in spite of his involvement therein. This echoes an important worry raised by Harry Frankfurt in the case of bodily action.<sup>119</sup> The worry is that of ensuring that the agent stands in the right kind of relation with his own capacities during the performance of an action. In the case of bodily action, Frankfurt's point was that, if we limit our account of action to the initial catalytic impulse and say that the bodily movements that result from the impulse are merely ballistic effects thereof, we are at a loss when trying to understand the two ways in which an agent can be related to his subsequent bodily movements, since in both cases they occur in a merely ballistic manner as a

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<sup>118</sup> As Strawson describes these forms of catalytic initiation, it is not obvious that what must result from such mental action is content becoming present to mind. For example, increasing the degree to which one is concentrating upon a given content or an aspect thereof need not result in either that particular content or another, new content coming to mind. It might involve, say, an intensification of some other kind. I shall return to this issue in the text.

<sup>119</sup> Frankfurt's worry was mentioned in chapter two.

causal by-product.<sup>120</sup> The analogous point in the case of mental action is this: if we limit our conception of mental action to the initial catalytic impulse and say that what happens as a result is merely a matter of mental ballistics, we are at a loss when trying to capture the two ways in which an agent can be related to the subsequent activation of his own cognitive capacities, since in both cases the activation occurs in a merely ballistic manner as a causal by-product. Moreover, and to make matters worse, since Strawson says nothing about whether the action of catalytic initiation is itself caused by the agent or by someone or something other than the agent, we are at a loss when trying to analyze another distinction, namely, between those instances of catalytic initiation that do and those instances that do not result from something that the agent does so as to bring them about and control them.<sup>121</sup> In essence, we lose sight of the role of the agent in controlling these aspects of his own conscious mental life. So how should we get the agent back in view? How should we explain mental action in a way that is responsive to such distinctions? We can begin by more carefully considering (a) the relation in which the agent stands with the mental action of catalytic initiation itself, and then (b) the relation in which the agent stands with the subsequent activation of his cognitive capacities.

### 2.1. *The Causation of Catalytic Initiation*

I suggest that the best way to understand the mental action of catalytic initiation, and hence the best way to account for the relation in which the agent stands with his own cognitive capacities when

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<sup>120</sup> In fact, given the underlying conception of action adopted by Strawson, he suffers from precisely this difficulty in the case of bodily action.

<sup>121</sup> Strawson hints that the cause of catalytic initiation might be an event within the brain and thus outside the range of conscious awareness, occurring before the agent is aware of its existence. Unfortunately, he offers no argument in defense of this highly controversial assumption. See his *ibid.* p. 248, note 45.

performing such an action, is in *causal* terms. In particular, such mental actions occur as a causal consequence of something that the agent *does* in order to bring them about, something that is absent in cases where catalytic initiation occurs as a result of someone or something other than the agent. Recognizing the causal contribution of the agent in the etiology of mental action enables us to account for the distinction between instances of catalytic initiation that are brought about and controlled by the agent and those that are not.

How, then, does an agent cause an instance of catalytic initiation when it is a mental action that he is performing? We can understand what happens when an agent causes his own mental action of catalytic initiation along precisely those lines that have been introduced in the previous chapters of this dissertation. When an agent catalytically initiates a mental event in which content becomes present to mind, the agent activates and employs a cognitive capacity. Whenever a cognitive capacity has been activated, either by the agent during the successful performance of a mental action or by someone or something other than the agent during a non-action mental event, content is present to conscious awareness in a capacity-specific manner. For example, when an agent successfully recalls information about the past, he utilizes his capacity for recollection which presents to mind the relevant information in the form of recalled content. Likewise, when an agent successfully imagines the appearance of a long lost friend, he utilizes his capacity for imagination which presents to mind a visual image in the form of imagined content.

Crucially, in order to activate the relevant cognitive capacity during the performance of a mental action, the agent must exert effort, however briefly in duration or limited in intensity. The exertion of effort is the use of a distinctive causal power, what in earlier chapters of this dissertation I have called the faculty of will-power. Through exerting effort and thereby exploiting the faculty of

will-power, the agent can initiate, sustain, and control the activation of the relevant cognitive capacity or capacities during the performance of a mental action. In cases where such effort is absent, any instance of catalytic initiation that occurs will not have been brought about and controlled by the agent. It is precisely this distinction that goes missing in what Strawson says about catalytic initiation.

## 2.2. *Beyond the Merely Ballistic*

In addition to enabling us to capture the distinction between instances of catalytic initiation that have been brought about and controlled by the agent and those that have not, recognizing the causal role of the agent's exertion of effort enables us to provide examples of mental action that are not restricted to the initiation of an event in which content becomes present to conscious awareness, thereby acknowledging the wider extent of the powers of agency within the domain of the mental. For example, through the exertion of effort the agent can not only bring about and control the mental action of catalytic initiation, the agent can also causally *sustain* the continued activation of the relevant cognitive capacity, *alter* the manner in which a capacity is activated, *suppress* or *hinder* the activation of other cognitive capacities, and *struggle* to perform a mental action in particularly difficult or extenuating circumstances. Let's consider examples of each.

Consider first a situation in which an agent corrects a partially successful performance of a mental action. For example, imagine an agent who is in the midst of attempting to recall the lyrics of a cherished song and that he comes to realize that he is not recalling them correctly, stops what he is doing, and then starts over again only to succeed the second time. In situations of this kind, after

the agent has initiated his capacity for recollection and a portion of the lyrics have become present to mind, he must intervene so as to halt the continued activation of that capacity and thus the ongoing delivery of the lyrics, and then initiate the capacity once again a few moments later. Crucially, in halting the activation of the relevant capacity in order to correct the error the agent does not catalytically initiate an event in which content becomes present to conscious awareness, and the agent is able to achieve this correction by exerting effort so as to take control over his own cognitive capacity by stopping its activation.

Next, consider a similar type of situation in which an agent comes to realize that he is in the midst of daydreaming and that his attention has momentarily lapsed from the task at hand. Suppose that after coming to this realization, the agent stops the daydream from occurring by suppressing the activity of the relevant cognitive capacity and re-focusing his attention on the task that he was performing moments prior to the onset of the daydream. In such cases, the agent intervenes by doing something, namely, by exerting effort so as to take active control over his capacity for imagination. The suppression of visual images seems to be a clear case in which the agent does not catalytically initiate an event in which content comes to mind. Rather, precisely the opposite seems to occur: by exerting effort so as to interfere with and stop the activation of the relevant cognitive capacity, the agent removes an image from conscious awareness.

Third, consider an agent who begins to visually imagine a particular object and then manipulates its various qualitative features. Keeping the image present to mind requires that the agent exert effort so as to continuously activate the relevant cognitive capacity as he attends to and manipulates its qualitative features. Such transformations of imagined content involve more than merely bringing to mind a particular content: the image is changed as the agent manipulates its

features, such as when one imagines the visual appearance of a beloved coffee mug and actively alters the features that it appears to have, say, by imagining a radical change in its shape. Such feats of imagination are not easy to perform, as anyone who has done so can attest, and when they occur it is not the case that new content comes to mind as a result of multiple catalytic initiations; rather, the same image that is present to mind over an extended period of time, however brief, undergoes a change that has been brought about by something that the agent does, something that is not the mere catalytic initiation of a further mental event in which other content comes to mind. The agent is able to achieve such feats of cognitive control by exerting a distinctive kind of effort so as to actively alter the qualitative features of the imagined content.

Fourth, consider the extraordinary case of Cathy Hutchinson.<sup>122</sup> In 1995, Hutchinson suffered from a catastrophic brainstem stroke that left her a tetraplegic. Ten years after the stroke, a silicon microelectrode array was surgically implanted in her primary motor cortex. After recovering from the surgery, Hutchinson began participating in weekly research sessions in which multiple patterns of neuronal activity were recorded during a variety of tasks, with the initial goal of developing and improving the brain-computer interface mechanism. The mechanism uses a sensor that detects the patterns of activity of multiple neurons in the primary motor cortex, a decoder that translates the patterns of neuronal activity into motor commands, and a computer gateway that then engages and controls another device in light of the motor commands. Through repeated practice, Hutchinson was very quickly able to control the movement of a cursor on a computer screen, much like one might do by using a computer mouse or track-pad, and she was able to do so by imagining making the hand, wrist, and arm movements that she would have performed had she had the ability

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<sup>122</sup> Her case is described by Leigh R. Hochberg, et al., "Reach and Grasp by People with Tetraplegia Using a Neurally Controlled Robotic Arm" in *Nature*, Volume 485, May 2012, pp. 373-377.

to use the relevant bodily capacities, a rather remarkable technological achievement. Crucially for our purposes here, she managed to achieve such feats of cognitive control by exerting a distinctive kind of effort so as to actively alter and control the precise details of what it was that she imagined herself doing, as well as fine-tuning her efforts in response to her perception of the movements of the cursor as it appeared on the computer screen.<sup>123</sup>

Finally, imagine an agent who manages to overcome an addiction. Suppose that the agent is addicted to caffeine and he regularly consumes coffee in order to satiate strong desires that he experiences quite frequently. Suppose that one day the agent decides to stop consuming caffeine, resolving never to do so again, and that on his fourth consecutive day without caffeine he finds himself confronted with a very strong desire for coffee in light of the opportunity to drink a freshly brewed cup thereof, but he manages to overcome the desire and refrain from drinking the coffee. In circumstances of this kind, in order to resist succumbing to the forceful presence of his desire to drink coffee and thereby adhere to his resolution, the agent must exert a distinctive kind of effort so as to take active control over his conscious mental life at that moment in time. Even the mental action of catalytic initiation itself, when undertaken in situations like this, requires the exertion of effort. After all, when confronted with a particularly potent desire, it is not easy to ignore it and any associated thoughts and bodily sensations that might be present to conscious awareness at that moment in time, or force oneself to entertain other thoughts or attend to something else. Doing so can be very challenging and in order to overcome such potential obstacles the agent must struggle to perform the mental action in question.

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<sup>123</sup> Note the similarity with the previous case, except that here we need not assume that what Cathy Hutchinson is imagining and manipulating is a *visual* image. It seems best to think of her as imagining the movements of her own body, which, if such an accomplishment can be described in imagistic terms seems not to be visual but bodily or bodily-motor. An analogous contrast might be between what a dancer does when imagining himself performing a pirouette, and what a sculptor does when imagining possible alterations of the shape of a piece of wet clay.



The point of such examples is twofold. On the one hand, such examples demonstrate the various kinds of ways in which the exertion of effort and the faculty of will-power play a crucial role in enabling the agent to exercise active causal control over his own conscious mental life, by employing his cognitive capacities in different ways. On another hand, such examples show that mental action is not restricted to the catalytic initiation of an event in which content becomes present to conscious awareness, thereby revealing the wider extent of the powers of agency within the domain of the mental. Notice that the criticism of Strawson's catalytic conception of mental action is akin to one that can be raised against a similar conception of bodily action.<sup>124</sup> The basic or fundamental kind of control that an agent can exert over his own body and bodily movements during the performance of a bodily action is hidden when we conceive of action in such a way that the causal role of the agent is restricted to the catalytic initiation of an event that occurs in a merely ballistic manner. The ballistic conception of action obscures this basic form of agential control because the subsequent bodily movements that result from the catalytic initiation occur *in precisely the same manner* as they do when they are brought about by something other than the agent's action of catalytic initiation. In both kinds of scenario, after the movements of the agent's body have been initiated, the bodily movements that occur do so according to the laws governing mechanistic forces, in a merely ballistic way. The upshot is that *there is no difference* from the point of view of the agent whose body is moving in these distinct circumstances, regardless of whether what is occurring has been caused by the agent or by someone or something other than the agent. His body simply moves in a ballistic way.

In the case of mental action, the very same worry arises when we follow Strawson and adopt a ballistic conception of such action. The basic or fundamental kind of control that an agent can

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<sup>124</sup> A similar criticism was raised in the second chapter of this dissertation, against the standard story of bodily action.

exert over the activity of his own cognitive capacities during the performance of a mental action is lost when we conceive of mental action in such a manner that the causal role of the agent is restricted to the catalytic initiation of a mental event that happens in a merely ballistic fashion. The ballistic conception of mental action hides this basic form of agential control because the subsequent activation of the relevant cognitive capacities that result from the catalytic initiation occurs *in just the same way* as they do when they are brought about by something other than the agent's action of catalytic initiation. As in the case of bodily action, in both types of circumstance, after the relevant cognitive capacities have been activated, they do so according to the natural causality of reason (as Strawson puts it), in a merely ballistic manner. The result is that, from the point of view of the agent whose cognitive capacities have become activated, *there is no distinction* between these cases, regardless of whether what is transpiring has been caused by the agent or by someone or something other than the agent. His cognitive capacities are simply activated in a ballistic manner.

Given the positive account of mental action described thus far, the basic form of agential control is made explicit, in two different ways. First, the mental action of catalytic initiation itself is something that the agent can cause and control. Through exerting effort, however minimal in duration or intensity, the agent can initiate the activity of the relevant cognitive capacity the result of which is that content becomes present to conscious awareness in a capacity-specific way. Second, in addition to causing and controlling catalytic initiation, the agent can also perform the sorts of mental actions mentioned above, by sustaining the ongoing activation of a cognitive capacity, by intervening to halt its activation, or by controlling the manner in which it is active, each of which involves the exertion of effort on the part of the agent and need not involve the onset of an event in which additional content becomes present to conscious awareness. Such instances of this basic kind

of agential control simply go missing in the account of mental action offered by Strawson. That is, Strawson is at a loss when it comes to accounting for the difference between situations in which an agent does and does not exert this basic form of agential control over the ongoing activation of his own cognitive capacities during the performance of a mental action, since for Strawson the agent can at most catalytically initiate their activation, while the rest is up to the supposed natural causality of reason.

### 3. *Revising Fundamental Commitments*

Thus far, I have suggested that we understand the notion of effort as the use of a causal power possessed by the agent, the manifestation of which initiates the activation of the relevant cognitive capacity during the performance of a mental action, where the initiation of the latter presents content to conscious awareness in a capacity-specific manner. If the account of mental action described here is correct, then we have good reason to revise some of the prevalent and fundamental assumptions in recent work in Anglo-American philosophy of mind and action. In particular, in addition to understanding mind and action in terms of mental states, events, and processes and the causal and functional relations between them, we must also include the notion of effort and the exertion thereof by the agent. We must do so, as suggested above, in order to capture the basic form of agential control that an agent can exert over his own cognitive capacities, including the distinction between those mental states, events, and processes that are brought about and controlled by the agent and those that are not, as well as the distinctive *ways* in which the agent exerts control over his own cognitive capacities during his performance of mental actions. Focusing exclusively on mental

states, events, and processes and the causal and functional relations between them obscures the fact that some instances thereof relate to the agent in a particular manner, whereas others do not.

One way of elaborating the notion of effort and the agent's exertion thereof is by equipping ourselves with a useful distinction that can be found in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, concerning two different ways in which a capacity can be activated.<sup>125</sup> The first way in which a capacity can be activated is "movement" or "change", a translation of *kinēsis*; the second way is "actuality" or "activity", a translation of *energeia*. The former term applies to the activation of something's capacity to move or change from a condition or state of potentiality towards a condition or state of actuality *while* the movement or change is taking place. When the resulting condition or state of actuality has been reached, the kinetic activation is no longer occurring. In contrast, the latter term applies to an activation of a capacity which consists in an active way of being, where this state of activity is itself *complete*, inasmuch as it is not the unfurling of a process of movement or change from a condition of potentiality to one of actuality. The energetic way in which a capacity can be activated consists in actively being in a particular condition or state.

For example, when an agent clenches his right hand, say, he employs a range of bodily capacities the activation of which consists in the coordinated movement or change from one type of condition to another: his hand moves, changing from open-handed or relaxed to close-handed or clenched, as its fingers and thumb curl towards the palm. Once the movement has been completed and his fist is clenched, the kinetic activation of those bodily capacities is no longer occurring. The capacities kinetically activate when the movement of the relevant body parts begins, they continue to

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<sup>125</sup> The terms are found in *Metaphysics* Book IX, Part 6 (1048b18-35). The distinction is not free from controversy within the relevant historical scholarship, but I think it is very useful for present purposes. I am indebted to the recent work of Matthew Boyle for drawing my attention to this distinction. See his paper "Making up Your Mind' and the Activity of Reason" in *Philosophers' Imprint*, Volume 11, Number 17, December 2011, especially pp. 19-23.

kinetically activate as the movement transpires over time towards its completion, and the kinetic activation ceases to occur when the movement stops and the action is complete. In the case of mental actions, a similar sort of thing happens, though there need only be change not movement, a change in the agent's state of mind.<sup>126</sup> For example, when an agent imagines the appearance of a particular statue, or recalls information about the past, say, he kinetically activates his cognitive capacities the activation of which consists in a coordinated change from one type of cognitive condition to another: his cognitive capacities kinetically activate to bring about a specific result, which is that content becomes present to conscious awareness in a capacity-specific manner, where the kinetic activation ceases to occur when the content becomes present to mind and the action is complete.

Notice that in the above cases, in order to keep his hand clenched, the agent must continue to exert effort and thereby exploit the faculty of will-power to actively sustain the position of his hand. This is precisely the sort of energetic activity that transpires when the faculty of will-power has been activated by the agent without bringing about the kinetic activation of another capacity for movement or change, but is complete in itself inasmuch as his fist remains in that position. And in the case of the performance of a mental action, in order to keep the relevant content present to conscious awareness, the agent must continue to exert effort and thereby exploit the faculty of will-power to actively sustain this state of mind. This is precisely the sort of energetic activity that transpires when the faculty of will-power has been activated by the agent without bringing about the kinetic activation of another capacity for change, but is complete in itself inasmuch as the relevant content retains its presence to mind over an extended period of time.

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<sup>126</sup> Of course, if it turns out that cognitive capacities just are bodily capacities of a particular sort—presumably capacities within the central nervous system—then movement will occur within the central nervous system when such mental actions take place.

Notice, too, that there are no circumstances in which an agent exerts effort and thereby energetically activates the faculty of will-power but the ongoing manifestation of this causal force, however brief in duration, produces nothing. That is, there are no circumstances in which “pure effort” occurs without a corresponding effect thereby produced. The exertion of effort by the agent *always* produces a result of some kind: in normal conditions where all goes well, the exertion of effort brings about the kinetic activation of a distinct capacity during the performance of an action; in abnormal conditions where all does not go well, the exertion of effort brings about some other result, which in such abnormal conditions will not be the action in question, but another event. Thus, the relevant conditions of completion for the energetic form of activation of will-power are understood disjunctively, such that in normal conditions the complete energetic activation of will-power produces the subsequent kinetic activation of the relevant capacity, and in abnormal conditions the complete energetic activation of will-power produces another event that is not the action in question. But in neither kind of case do we find a “pure” exertion of effort which somehow stands alone or exists in isolation from that which it produces or brings about.

Given this distinction between the two different ways in which a capacity can be activated, we can better understand the notions of effort and will-power as they have been used thus far, and we can see how we might revise some of the widespread and deep-seated assumptions in recent work in Anglo-American philosophy of mind and action. The faculty of will-power is a causal power the energetic activation of which consists in the effort exerted by the agent so as to kinetically activate and employ one or more capacities during the performance of an action. The faculty of will-power itself is also a capacity, though fundamentally different in kind from that of bodily and cognitive capacities. Will-power is an energetic capacity, in Aristotle’s sense introduced above: the

manifestation of will-power through the agent's exertion of effort is an actively maintained and self-sustained condition that is complete in itself and which consists in the manifestation of causal force. In normal conditions and when all goes well, this active condition of being, the sustained exertion of effort by the agent (or the continued activation of will-power, or the ongoing manifestation of causal force) produces a further end, namely, the kinetic activation of a capacity during the performance of an action. Bodily and cognitive capacities are not themselves energetic capacities in this sense, since they are capacities for movement or change from a state of potentiality to a particular state of actuality.<sup>127</sup>

By revising the prevalent assumptions in recent work in Anglo-American philosophy of mind and action so as to include the notions of effort and will-power as well as the distinction between the two different ways in which a capacity can be activated, we can explain mental action in a way that is sensitive to the distinctions drawn above, between those mental states, events, and processes that are brought about and controlled by the agent and those that are not, and the basic form of agential control that an agent can exert over his own capacities when activating them and employing them during the performance of an action. It is important to highlight that the kind of agential control described here, as well as the exertion of effort by the agent, can be *hidden* both from the perspective of explanatory scrutiny and also from the perspective of the agent who is performing the action in question. Such phenomena can be hidden from daily life since they are so fundamental and in a sense taken for granted during the performance of more complicated actions that involve

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<sup>127</sup> To clarify the distinction between will-power as a capacity that is activated energetically, and bodily and cognitive capacities that are activated kinetically: will-power is "blindly causal" inasmuch as its energetic activation by the agent does not itself consist in movement or change toward a particular end state, that is, within a developmental process that has a particular teleological structure; bodily and cognitive capacities are not "blindly causal" in this sense, since their kinetic activation (via the exertion of effort by the agent) does consist in movement or change toward a particular end state, within a teleologically structured developmental process.

skill and habituation. When an agent becomes skilled at performing mundane actions, the effort required to exert control over the relevant capacities can recede into the background of conscious awareness, since the habitual dimension of the performance of such actions enables the agent to attend to other, perhaps more important matters. But the exertion of effort is present nonetheless<sup>128</sup>, however minimal in intensity or duration, as part of the means by which the agent initiates the activation of the relevant capacities, since even during the performance of skilled and habitual actions the capacities in question do not activate themselves and they are not activated by someone or something other than the agent.<sup>129</sup> Put first-personally, it is *I* who initiate the activation of my own cognitive capacities when I perform a mundane or complex mental action, even if and when my awareness of my own role in doing so is obscured by the wider context in which the action transpires, where I might be attending more carefully to facts other than that of my own performance of the relevant action.

#### 4. *Concluding Remarks and Looking Ahead*

In this chapter, I have argued against the account of mental action defended by Galen Strawson and provided an alternative account that endorses the truth in what he claims while escaping the difficulties therein. As we saw, Strawson was correct to claim that an agent can initiate a mental event in which content becomes present to conscious awareness and that in such circumstances the

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<sup>128</sup> As in the previous chapters of this dissertation, I am *not* claiming that effort must be manifest to or otherwise figure within the content of the conscious experience of the agent who is performing the action in question.

<sup>129</sup> Here, the proponent of the standard story will interject, claiming that it is neither the agent, nor someone other than the agent who initiates the activation of the relevant capacities, but particular *features of* the agent, namely, the onset of the appropriately related motivational factors that explain what it is that the agent takes himself to be doing. I argued against the standard story's account of bodily action in the second chapter. An analogous argument can be made in the case of mental action, though I set that aside for present purposes.



content that comes to mind has not been constructed by that act of initiation. However, the positive account offered by Strawson was problematic because it employed an unduly restrictive and highly controversial conception of action in which the notion of action is limited to the initiation of those events that the agent can bring about directly, without the causal intermediation of natural processes or forces. When this underlying notion of action was applied to the case of mental action, Strawson assumed that when performing a mental action, an agent can do nothing more than catalytically initiate a process the result of which is a mental event wherein content becomes present to conscious awareness, according to the supposed natural causality of reason.

I argued against Strawson's account of mental action on two grounds. First, I claimed that this controversial underlying notion of action is simply assumed by Strawson without an explicit argument in defence thereof, and that there are plausible alternative conceptions of action that do not restrict mental action to the merely catalytic initiation of succeeding mental events that are assumed to take place through the supposed natural causality of reason. Second, I claimed (a) that Strawson's account obscures the relation in which the agent can stand with the activation of his own cognitive capacities during the performance of a mental action, since his account implies that the relation is identical in cases where the mental events in question have and have not been brought about and controlled by the agent through the action of catalytic initiation, thereby placing the agent as a kind of spectator of the activity of his own cognitive capacities, and (b) that *pace* Strawson, the mental action of catalytic initiation itself is plausibly one that the agent can cause through the exertion of effort required to initiate the activation of the relevant cognitive capacities employed therein.

In presenting an alternative account of mental action, I suggested that effort plays a causal role in the performance thereof, through which the agent can activate and employ his own cognitive capacities, both in cases where the agent catalytically initiates a mental event in which content becomes present to conscious awareness, and in cases where the ongoing activation of a cognitive capacity does not bring about a mental event in which further content is presented to conscious awareness, such as when an agent suppresses a cognitive capacity and thereby removes content from the purview of conscious awareness, or manipulates the qualitative features of an imagined image as it remains present to mind, or exerts effort while displaying strength of will in overcoming an addictive impulse or desire. Crucially, during the ongoing performance of a mental action, the agent stands in an active relation with his own cognitive capacities as he continually sustains their activation or manipulates the manner in which they are activating if need be, a relation which differs in kind from that in which the agent stands when the activation has been brought about by someone or something other than the agent.

The notion of effort was explained in terms of the faculty of will-power, a causal power that the agent alone possesses and utilizes. By exerting effort and thereby exploiting the faculty of will-power, the agent can initiate, sustain, and control the activation of his own cognitive capacities during the performance of a mental action and through this means is able to take active control over his own conscious mental life. I suggested that we understand the notion of effort and the agent's exertion thereof using a terminological distinction found in Aristotle, between two different ways in which a capacity can be activated. The exertion of effort by the agent is a form of energetic activation of the faculty of will-power, which when active is complete insofar as it is not the development of a process from a state of potentiality towards a state of actuality, but is a blindly

causal power that in normal conditions where all goes well kinetically activates the relevant cognitive capacities which present content to conscious awareness in a capacity-specific way.

Finally, I suggested that if the alternative account of mental action presented here is correct, there is good reason for us to revise a number of fundamental assumptions that are operative within contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of mind and action. In addition to understanding mind and action in terms of mental states, events, and processes and the causal and functional interactions that obtain between them, we must also include the notion of effort and the agent's exertion thereof. Doing so illuminates the basic form of agential control that the agent can exert over his own cognitive capacities when initiating, sustaining, and controlling them and their ongoing activation during the performance of a mental action. Without such additional notions, we are at a loss when accounting for the kinds of relations in which an agent can stand with his own cognitive capacities, since such relations are obscured when we focus entirely and exclusively upon mental states, events, and processes and the causal and functional relations between them.

Much work remains to be done. Although not explored here, there is an epistemic dimension to mental action. If the agent in question is one who possesses the relevant epistemic capacities, then it seems that he will be in a position to know which of his mental states, events, and processes have been brought about and controlled by him and which have not. In further elaborating the account of mental action provided here, the way(s) in which such an agent is able to achieve this kind of knowledge must be explained. In addition, nothing has been said here about the normative, evaluative, or potentially rational dimension of mental action. If the agent in question is one who possesses the relevant normative, evaluative, or rational capacities, then it seems that he will be in a position to assess the motivational factors that do and do not support his performance of a

particular mental action, such as the formation of a new belief or the alteration of a prior commitment in light of new evidence, say. A satisfactory account of mental action must explain the way(s) in which such an agent is able to perform mental actions in light of his normative, evaluative, or rational assessments of such factors. Last but not least, although the goal here has been to provide an account of mental action that is sensible on its own terms, regardless of any possible relations with the notions of freedom, determinism, and the evaluation of moral responsibility, the potential implications that the account has for these issues is worthy of exploration. Such important topics await future investigation.

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## *Appendix*

In this appendix, I provide a more thorough description of each of the respective accounts of agent causation offered by Roderick Chisholm, Richard Taylor, Timothy O'Connor, and E. J. Lowe, as they were introduced in the first chapter of this dissertation.

### 1. *Roderick Chisholm on Agent Causation*

In his seminal paper, "Human Freedom and the Self", Roderick Chisholm introduced and defended a notion of agent causation.<sup>130</sup> According to Chisholm, our conception of action should be neither deterministic nor indeterministic in nature. Here, *determinism* is the idea that every event that is involved in an action is caused by some other event, and *indeterminism* is the idea that either the action itself, or some event that is essential to the action, is not caused at all. Chisholm believes that both determinism and indeterminism undermine the sense in which an agent can be responsible for the actions that he performs. In brief,<sup>131</sup> Chisholm thinks that determinism is problematic because it rules out the possibility that the agent is responsible for the actions that he performs, since determinism entails that the agent could not have done otherwise than he did; and he thinks that indeterminism is problematic because it also rules out the possibility that the agent is responsible for the actions that he performs, since indeterminism entails that the action in question was a capricious

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<sup>130</sup> All references to this text will be to the version reprinted in Gary Watson, ed., *Free Will*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 26-37.

<sup>131</sup> For our purposes, the precise details of Chisholm's rejection of determinism and indeterminism do not matter, for as mentioned in the preliminary remark at the outset of the above chapter, we are not here concerned with providing an account of the conditions under which an action has been performed with "free will", where an agent's performing an action with free will is thought to be required for the agent to be morally responsible for what he did.

occurrence, something that happened out of the blue. Informally put, according to Chisholm, determinism eliminates the agent's *freedom to do otherwise*, while indeterminism eliminates the agent's *control over* what does in fact happen.

As Chisholm understands it, the notion of agent causation occupies a middle-ground between determinism and indeterminism. On the one hand, it is not committed to determinism, since it is not committed to the claim that every event that is involved in an action is caused by another *event*. On the other hand, it is not committed to indeterminism either, since the agent can be essential to an action as its *cause*, and in such circumstances the agent can have at least a minimal degree of control over what is happening. Thus, for Chisholm, actions can be caused by their agents but not in the event-causal sense that figures in determinism, and so they are not merely random occurrences. So how, exactly, does the agent become involved as a cause of the actions that he performs? And to what, exactly, is the agent causally related in this manner?

To address each of these issues, consider the following example, one that Chisholm employs while giving explicit credit to Aristotle.<sup>132</sup> Imagine that a staff moves a stone, which is moved by a hand, which is moved by a man. According to Chisholm, if the man did indeed bring about the motion of the stone in this way, then we have a number of instances of causation or causal relations, one of which will be of the agent-causal type, in the following sense: the motion of the stone was an event that was caused by the motion of the staff; the motion of the staff was an event that was caused by the motion of the hand; and the motion of the hand was an event that was caused by the man himself, who is not to be understood as an event of any kind. Chisholm elaborates: "the motion of the hand was caused by certain muscles; and...the motion of the muscles was caused by certain events that took place within the brain. But some event, and presumably one of those that took place

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<sup>132</sup> See *ibid.* p. 26. The reference is to Aristotle's *Physics*, Book VII, Chapter 5.

within the brain, was caused by the agent and not by any other events".<sup>133</sup> Thus, the agent-causal relation is one that obtains between *the agent* and events that occur within his own *brain*: that is, the agent becomes involved in the performance of his own action by having the ability to cause particular events to occur within his brain, events which in suitably normal conditions cause the appropriate bodily motions to occur, which in suitably normal conditions cause the sought-for bodily action to happen.

Now, there are a number of objections that come to mind when encountering this notion of agent causation, two of which Chisholm directly addresses. The first objection is this: it seems very odd to say that the agent is able to do something *to his brain*, if only because the agent might not be in a position to know that he so much as possesses one; it seems much more natural to say that the agent does something *to the stone*, even if his doing so is accomplished by way of his doing something to the staff, which is itself accomplished by his doing something to his hand, which is itself accomplished in virtue of his having a brain and properly functioning central nervous system. Thus (concludes the imagined objector), saying that the agent has the ability to cause particular events to occur within his brain seems to be confused.

In response, Chisholm introduces a distinction between the notions of "making *A* happen" and "doing *A*".<sup>134</sup> As he understands it, the distinction is this: when an agent is doing something, there is a very clear sense in which the agent *knows* that he is doing just that, but the same cannot be

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<sup>133</sup> See *ibid.* p. 31.

<sup>134</sup> See *ibid.* p. 31. He credits this distinction to Abraham Melden, *Free Action* (London: Routledge Kegan & Paul, 1961), though he is careful to say that Melden's views are contrary to his own.

said of the things that he makes happen while doing so.<sup>135</sup> For example, when a man reaches for and picks up the staff, one of the things that he does is simply that: to reach for and pick up the staff. But in doing so, says Chisholm, there are many things that the agent makes happen which are not things that the agent is doing in the sense intended here, such as moving various particles of air or casting a shadow. The latter are merely things that the agent *makes happen*, as opposed to the things that he *is doing*. With this distinction in mind, Chisholm responds to the objection by saying:

[I]t is true that [the] agent does nothing to or with his brain...[but] the brain event may be something which...he made happen in picking up the staff. The only difference between the two cases is this: in each case, he made something happen when he picked up the staff; but in the one case—the motion of the air-particles or of the shadows—it was the motion of the staff that caused the event to happen; and in the other case—the event that took place in the brain—it was this event that caused the motion of the staff.<sup>136</sup>

Thus, when the agent picks up the staff, the agent causes an event to occur within his brain, in the sense that he makes that cerebral event happen *in* the act of picking up the staff. The agent does not make the event within his brain occur *in the same way* that he brings about the event in which he is picking up the staff, since the former event is one about which the agent can be in complete ignorance, even though it is something that, if Chisholm is correct, the agent himself brings about through employing his agent-causal powers.

I think we can express Chisholm's response in slightly clearer terminology. The idea is that the agent *directly* causes an event to occur within his brain, and *indirectly* brings about the event in which he picks up the staff. What the agent directly causes is that event to which he stands in the

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<sup>135</sup> Although un-credited in the text, there is a very clear affinity here with some of Elizabeth Anscombe's remarks about the relations between knowledge and intentional action. See her *Intention*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>136</sup> See *ibid.* p. 32.

agent-causal relation, i.e., the relevant cerebral event; when all goes well, the relevant cerebral event causes the event in which the agent picks up the staff. The agent himself does not *directly* (i.e., “agentially”) cause the event in which he picks up the staff.

The second objection to the notion of agent causation that Chisholm addresses is one that he considers to be more difficult than the first.<sup>137</sup> The second objection is this: the defender of agent causation claims that there is some event, most likely a cerebral event, which is not caused by any other event but by the agent himself; but in order for the agent himself to be the cause of this event, he must not undergo any sort of change, or produce any other intermediary event which brings about the event in question, for then the agent *as such* would not be the cause; thus (concludes the imagined objector), there seems to be nothing here that we can describe as the agent’s *making* the event in question occur; that is, there seems to be no difference between the event simply or randomly happening and the agent’s making the event occur; so in what, exactly, can the agent’s causation consist?

In response, Chisholm claims that the difference between the event in question simply happening, on the one hand, and the event in question occurring because the agent made it happen, on the other hand, lies in the fact that only in the latter case was the event caused by the agent.<sup>138</sup> That is to say, the events are distinct in virtue of the fact that they have different causes. And when the agent causes an event in this kind of way, says Chisholm, there is no other action that the agent performs in order to bring it about; the event in question is a *basic action*.<sup>139</sup> This response,

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<sup>137</sup> See *ibid.* p. 32.

<sup>138</sup> See *ibid.* p. 33.

<sup>139</sup> Arthur Danto and Sydney Morgenbesser provide a useful definition of a notion of basic action: “*B* is a *basic action* of *a* if and only if (i) *B* is an action and (ii) whenever *a* performs *B*, there is no other action *A* performed by *a* such that *B* is caused by *A*.” See their paper “What We Can Do” published in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 60, Number 15, July

Chisholm readily admits, seems to be unhelpful, for it seems to amount to saying that the only difference between an event simply occurring and a superficially similar event occurring by way of agent causation is just that the latter event was brought into existence through agent causation, where there is nothing else that the agent does other than cause that very event. This difficulty, Chisholm claims, although one that infects the very notion of causation, whether of the agent- or the event-type, should not dissuade us from employing the notion of causation in this context, for the simple reason that the notion of agent causation is in fact *better understood* than that of event causation. It is better understood because we directly comprehend our own causal powers as agents that are capable of producing particular kinds of events.<sup>140</sup> When we understand our own causal powers, concludes Chisholm, we understand that we cause particular events to happen in this unique sort of way, and *nothing*—no other persons or agents, and no other events or occurrences external or internal to us—causes us to bring about the events in question. As he puts it in a rather memorable fashion: “Each of us, when we act, is a prime mover unmoved.”<sup>141</sup>

## 2. Richard Taylor’s Account of Agent Causation

In his book entitled *Action and Purpose*, Richard Taylor introduced and defended a notion of agent causation.<sup>142</sup> According to Taylor, we can understand human agency in terms of the related notions

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1963, pp. 435-445. The passage quoted is on p. 435. Note, however, that Chisholm does not use the expression “basic action”, though his account is consistent with the definition that Danto and Morgenbesser provide.

<sup>140</sup> In making this latter claim, Chisholm cites the work of Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: Printed for John Bell, Parliament Square, and G. G. J. & J. Robinson, London, 1788), essay IV, chapter 4.

<sup>141</sup> See *ibid.* p. 34.

<sup>142</sup> See his *Action and Purpose* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966). All references to Taylor’s work will be to this edition.

of a *causal power* and a *causal capacity*, where the notion of a causal capacity has a distinct meaning within the context of human agency.<sup>143</sup> Outside the context of human agency, says Taylor, the notion of a causal capacity is that of a particular kind of event that *must happen* when particular conditions are met. For example, the statement “This acid can dissolve a piece of zinc” attributes a causal capacity to a volume of acid, and expresses the idea that, if a piece of zinc were dropped in the acid, it would dissolve. In thinking of the acid and its relation to zinc in this way, says Taylor, we are assuming that when particular conditions are met the chemical composition of the acid is *causally sufficient* for a piece of zinc to dissolve in it; that is, that the dissolving of a piece of zinc in the acid is *causally necessitated* in conditions of that type.

Within the context of human agency, says Taylor, things are importantly different. In such a context, when we say that a particular agent possesses the capacity to do such-and-so, we are *not* thinking of a particular kind of relation that obtains between discrete events, such that the onset of one event is causally necessitated when particular conditions obtain. For example, the statement “He can move his finger” attributes to the agent a particular bodily capacity, but it does not express the idea of a particular kind of event that must happen when particular conditions are met. The reason it does not is this: when an agent truthfully reports that he can move his finger, he is not thereby claiming that, if there should occur within him a particular event or the onset of a particular state, then the motion of his finger would follow as a necessary causal consequence, since this kind of counter-factual relation can obtain while the agent plays no role whatsoever in the production of the relevant bodily motion. That is, it is possible that if a certain muscle in his forearm were to contract,

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<sup>143</sup> See *ibid.* pp. 40-56, for his preliminary discussion of the notion of causal power. As he understands them, the notions of causal power and causal capacity have their origin in the work of Aristotle. He employs both notions in self-conscious opposition to the standard way of understanding causation as a relation between distinct events. See chapters 2 and 3 for his interesting discussion of the history and metaphysics of the notion of causation.



say, then the motion of his finger would follow as a necessary causal consequence. In such circumstances, though the counter-factual relation obtains, the agent himself *does nothing*. Thus, says Taylor, this is not how we should understand such statements as “He can move his finger”.

Here, says Taylor, it might be tempting to suggest that such statements express the idea that there exists a genuine causal relation between, on the one hand, a special sort of inner mental event like a “volition” or “act of will”, and, on the other hand, the bodily event that is the motion of the relevant finger. According to Taylor, this idea presents a confused picture of human agency. As he puts it:

Surely when I say I can move my finger, and know that what I am saying is true, I am not expressing the idea of a causal connection between the behavior of my finger and some such internal hocus-pocus as this [i.e., a “volition” or “act of will”], the occurrence of which I can seriously doubt.<sup>144</sup>

According to Taylor, the problem with postulating the existence of such inner mental events in an explanation of human agency is that there seems to be little evidence that they exist. As he puts it, “ordinary experience” suggests that such mental events neither exist nor cause bodily events, as such mental events are neither self-consciously nor introspectively discovered prior to the relevant bodily events, which renders their existence at least dubious.<sup>145</sup> Put slightly differently, were such inner mental events to exist and cause overt bodily events, it would seem likely that they would in some way manifest themselves prior to causing the relevant bodily events. Since no such mental events seem to be discovered in the course of what Taylor calls “ordinary experience”, we lack good reason to suppose that they exist and play such a crucial role in the explanation of human agency.

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<sup>144</sup> See *ibid.* p. 49.

<sup>145</sup> See *ibid.* p. 50, for his use of the expression “ordinary experience”. Although I agree that the picture of human agency that Taylor is criticizing here is highly problematic, I think that his dismissal of it is not satisfactory. I set this issue aside.

So how are we to understand such statements as “He can move his finger”, statements which ascribe particular capacities to particular agents? If they do not merely express counter-factual relations among events, do they thereby fail to express *any* sort of causal relation? Taylor believes that when we ascribe a capacity of this kind to an agent, we are saying that the performance of that kind of action is *within his power*, in the sense that it is *up to the agent* whether or not such an action will occur. Taylor admits that saying that such-and-so is “up to” or “within the power” of the agent is baffling, but he thinks that we “understand what it *is* for something to be in our power, and the fact that no one can *say* what it is is no disconfirmation of this.”<sup>146</sup> Crucially, says Taylor, we also understand that this way of thinking of capacities is not applicable to merely physical objects, for it does not make sense to think that it is “up to” a particular volume of acid whether or not it will dissolve a particular sample of zinc, say, or that it is “within the power” of a tree whether or not it will wave its branches in the breeze. Thus, concludes Taylor, the notion of a capacity or range of capacities that are “within the power” of an agent is applicable only to *active agents* as such. In attributing such capacities we must make reference, either explicitly or not, to an active agent who is able to exert some kind of control over the capacities in question.<sup>147</sup>

What more, if anything, can be said of the idea of a capacity that is “within the power” of an active agent? According to Taylor, the kinds of capacities that we attribute to active agents are importantly different from the kinds of capacities that we attribute to merely physical objects, in the following sense: the capacities that merely physical objects possess remain in place even in conditions

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<sup>146</sup> See *ibid.* p. 55, his italics. Note here the similarity to Chisholm’s claim mentioned above, that even though the notion of causation that is applicable in the context of human agency is hard to describe in detail, we are nevertheless well acquainted with the idea through the understanding that we possess of our own causal powers.

<sup>147</sup> See *ibid.* p. 74 and pp. 108-111.

where it is physically impossible for them to be activated.<sup>148</sup> For example, the capacity of a particular volume of acid to dissolve zinc remains even in conditions where every known sample of the metal has been safely locked away in a vault in which there is no such acid present. Here, says Taylor, we can truthfully say that it is within the power of the acid to dissolve zinc, since by this we mean to say that if, contrary to present (imagined) circumstances and under easily specifiable normal conditions, a sample of zinc were to be placed in the acid, then the acid would begin to dissolve it.

In contrast, says Taylor, the capacities that we attribute to and claim to be within the power of an active agent are different. For example, the capacity of a particular agent to move his right index finger can be eliminated by conditions in which his right hand is encased in a strong and tight cast, rendering impossible any manual movement whatsoever. Here, claims Taylor, we cannot say that it is nevertheless within the power of this agent to move his right index finger. This power is destroyed by the physical impossibility of exercising it and so we cannot truthfully say that if, contrary to present (imagined) circumstances and under easily specifiable normal conditions, the cast were to be removed, then the agent would begin to move his finger. More informally put, when every impediment to the realization of an ordinary causal capacity of an inanimate physical object is removed, that capacity is at once activated, whereas when every impediment to the activation or exercise of even a simple power of agency is removed, that power *can* be exercised, but it need not. Crucially, it is within the power of the agent in question whether or not that capacity is in fact activated.

Assuming that the notion of what we shall henceforth call an “agential capacity” is clear, we can return to the question of what it means to say that it is “within the power” of an agent whether or not the capacity in question is activated. For Taylor, when we say such things, we are *not*

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<sup>148</sup> See *ibid.* pp. 52-53.

claiming that the agent's motivational factors, such as his beliefs, desires, decisions, intentions, emotional states, etc., cause the activation of the capacities in question. This is not to suggest that such motivational factors do not exist, it is only to say that they are not among the causes of the activation of the capacities that are employed when the action occurs. Moreover, says Taylor, neither does the activation of the relevant capacities result from the agent *trying* to do so, as this notion of trying-as-cause is problematic because it can be understood "only in terms of its alleged effect, rendering it a dubious candidate as the cause of anything".<sup>149</sup> As he explains:

The concept of trying is, as such, entirely empty, having no meaning whatever apart from the *act* with which a particular trying is logically related. We cannot attach any meaning at all to an assertion that someone is "trying" until we are told what it is that he is trying *to do*.<sup>150</sup>

Thus, although Taylor thinks that there are such things as acts of trying, when an agent is trying to perform a particular action, the trying itself cannot be isolated as a special sort of cause of the activation of the capacities that are employed when the action occurs. Rather, says Taylor, when the agent is in the midst of doing something with the purpose of accomplishing a goal, whether or not the goal is in fact achieved, *only then* can the agent be said to be trying to perform the action in question.

If neither the agent's motivational factors nor his trying to perform the action in question are the causes of the activation of the relevant capacities, then what is? The key, suggests Taylor, lies in

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<sup>149</sup> See *ibid.* p. 78.

<sup>150</sup> See *ibid.* p. 78, his italics. Note here that the argument Taylor is making depends on the assumption that items that stand in a logical or semantic relationship cannot *also* be said to stand in a causal relationship. Thus, if the notion of someone's *trying* to walk to the store, say, cannot be understood in isolation from the notion that the sought-for action is that of *walking to the store*, then, if the assumption is correct, the former notion cannot refer to the cause of the action in question. I am skeptical of the truth of this assumption, but I set it aside for now.

what was mentioned above: that in order to understand an event as an action, one must make reference, either explicitly or not, to the *active agent* who is able to exert some kind of control over the relevant capacities. The essential reference to an active agent is crucial and illuminates a key point: that the understanding of human agency, and of the types of causal powers and causal capacities that such agents possess, depends upon an understanding of the active role of the agent in those conditions in which he activates his own capacities in the performance of an action.

Understanding this role enables one to recognize the difference between cases of *activity* and *passivity*, that is, between situations where an agent is active with respect to the capacities in question and cases where the agent remains passive. The active role of the agent might not be obvious in every case, and it might be very difficult to know when the distinction applies to agents other than oneself, but it remains clear nonetheless. According to Taylor, it remains clear precisely because “every man seems to know, within himself—independently of any observations of his own behavior—which motions and changes in his body are within his *immediate control* and which are not. The distinction seems, therefore, to be a clear and obvious one, and yet it is not a distinction in behavior, but rather in the *sources* of behavior.”<sup>151</sup> Thus, when the agent is active in this sense, he is the *source* of his own actions, and to say that the agent is the source of his own actions is to say that such actions are within his immediate control. And this means, for Taylor, that the agent is the *cause* of those actions that he performs, that are within his immediate control in the relevant sense.

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<sup>151</sup> See *ibid.* p. 87, italics added. There are two points to mention here. First, as with remarks made by Chisholm in this context, there is an obvious affinity to the claims of Elizabeth Anscombe on the putative non-observational kind of knowledge that an agent can have of his own actions. Second, there is assumed to be an important connection here between what the agent *knows* independently of observation of his own activity, and *whether* such activity is or is not within his immediate control when he knows what he does. That is, Taylor is assuming that, at least in many cases, if an agent is in immediate control of his own activity, then that agent will know – not merely be in a position to know – in this non-observational manner that this is so.

Now, according to Taylor, to say that the agent is the cause of his own action is to claim first and foremost that there are no prior *events* which are *by themselves* causally sufficient for the performance of the action in question.<sup>152</sup> The agent himself must bring about his own action and, crucially, he does so *directly*. His doing so is direct, says Taylor, in the sense that there is no event or state or process within or external to the agent that stands as a causal intermediary between him and the action that he performs. Rather, the agent *intervenes* in the series of discrete events that precede the performance of the relevant action, in the sense that the satisfaction of every condition required for the performance of the action in question does not guarantee that the action occurs.<sup>153</sup> The agent himself must make the action occur. Equally as importantly, there is no other action that the agent performs that is the cause of the action in question, and so the actions that the agent performs directly are *basic*, in the sense introduced above.<sup>154</sup> Taylor believes that basic actions are so simple in structure that one cannot describe *how* they are performed. As he puts it: “Some of these simpler acts [i.e., basic actions] are absolutely simple, however, in the sense that they cannot be broken down or analyzed into any simpler acts at all, even though they may not be simple events.”<sup>155</sup> Thus, the agent-causal relation is conceived of as a direct and unmediated relation between an agent and the basic actions that he performs, where the basic actions in question are simple in the sense that they contain no further, simpler acts as constituent parts.

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<sup>152</sup> See *ibid.* pp. 112-115. In particular: “The concept of agency, or the initiation of actions by agents, is compatible both with the assertion of determinism and with its denial, leaving entirely open the question whether every agent is caused to do everything that he does” (p. 115).

<sup>153</sup> See *ibid.* p. 116. As he puts it there: “the satisfaction of all these necessary conditions does not guarantee that my finger moves, nor does the combination of them guarantee that I move it. Something more is required, and that is, simply, that I cause it to move.”

<sup>154</sup> See note 139 above, where I mentioned a notion of basic action as it was introduced and defined by Danto and Morgenbesser and later employed by Chisholm.

<sup>155</sup> See *ibid.* p. 118. I criticized this idea in chapter one, as it appears in both Chisholm and Taylor’s accounts of agent causation.

So what of the notion of the agent that figures in this account of agent causation? According to Taylor, in speaking of an agent, we are *not* claiming that the agent is a non-observable, mental entity that is distinct from but associated with its material, organic body. Rather, for Taylor, the notion is coextensive with that of a *person*.<sup>156</sup> That is, when attributing causal powers to the agent, we are doing no more than attributing such powers to that particular person, and the person as such is not to be understood merely as a material, organic body, or as a non-observable, mental entity that exists in its own right. A person is, as Taylor puts it, “a living, thinking being, having limbs, heart, muscles, nervous system, and so on” so that when we say that a particular person is the cause of his own action, we “are simply saying that these living, thinking beings, possessed of limbs, hearts, muscles, nerves, and so on, act.”<sup>157</sup>

### 3. *Timothy O'Connor on Agent Causation*

In recent work, Timothy O'Connor has defended a related account of agent causation.<sup>158</sup> According to O'Connor, at the core of at least some actions there exists an ontologically irreducible causal relation between an agent and an appropriate internal event that triggers later elements of the

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<sup>156</sup> See *ibid.* pp. 134-138. He says (p. 136): “There is, in fact, no such thing as ‘the self,’ any more than there is such a thing as ‘the person’ or ‘the man’.” There are only men, sometimes referred to as persons, and sometimes referred to oddly as selves.” Thus, for Taylor, the notions of the agent, the self, the person, and the man can be used interchangeably.

<sup>157</sup> See *ibid.* p. 138.

<sup>158</sup> See his *Persons and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. chapters 3 – 5; “Agent Causation”, originally published in Timothy O'Connor, ed., *Agents, Causes, and Events: Essays on Indeterminism and Free Will* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1995), reprinted in Gary Watson, ed., *Free Will*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 257-284; and “Agent-Causal Power” in Toby Handfield, ed., *Dispositions and Causes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 189-214.

action.<sup>159</sup> Precisely what does O'Connor have in mind when he speaks of an "ontologically irreducible causal relation"? What, exactly, is the "appropriate internal event" that triggers later "elements" of the action? And how does he understand the notion of an agent?

According to O'Connor, the causal relation that obtains between an agent and the relevant internal event is *ontologically irreducible* in the sense that it is a genuine but primitive relation that can obtain between distinct phenomena. As such, it is not reducible to mere constant conjunction between or counter-factual relations among distinct events, nor is it simply an inaccurate way of describing events as they actually occur. As he puts it, "agent causation is a distinct embodiment of the same primitive feature of *causal production*, or oomph, at work in event causation".<sup>160</sup> The notion of causal production that O'Connor has in mind is the idea of something being such as to "bring about" an effect, which is to be explained in terms of the notion of a "powerful particular".<sup>161</sup> The idea of a powerful particular is the idea of an object such that, when it is placed in appropriate conditions, its causal powers are manifested by or activated in observable effects. The powers that an object possesses at any given moment in time are a byproduct of its underlying nature, for example, its physical or chemical structure. Given the underlying nature of the object in question, particular effects are *distinctive* of the object when it is placed within appropriate conditions. Conditions prompt the activation of a power in one of two ways: either through *stimulating* a potentiality to

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<sup>159</sup> I say at the core of "at least some" actions in order to avoid a terminological confusion. O'Connor is concerned with providing an account of the conditions under which an agent acts with "free will", in the sense that in acting with "free will" the agent "determines just which action she performs in a particular circumstance" (see *Persons and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will* [New York, Oxford University Press, 2000], p. 43). As when describing Chisholm's and Taylor's views above, I am not here interested in spelling out such conditions, so I refer to "at least some" actions to highlight the fact that O'Connor is not attempting to describe the conditions in which *any* action occurs, but only those that he deems to be performed with "free will".

<sup>160</sup> See his *op. cit.*, p. 67, italics added.

<sup>161</sup> In explaining the notion of a "powerful particular", O'Connor cites Rom Harré and Edward H. Madden, *Causal Powers: A Theory of Natural Necessity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishing, 1975).



activity or by *removing* an inhibitor or barrier to the activity. An example of the former kind of prompt is the dropping of a sample of zinc in an acid, which enables the acid to alter the composition of the zinc, and an example of the latter kind of prompt is the displacement of air from an underwater cylinder, which enables the surrounding body of water to crush it. Crucially, according to O'Connor, the powerful particular account of causation is consistent with the claim that a genuine causal relation can obtain in a way that does *not* imply that the type of event brought about on one occasion must always be or generally is produced under relevantly similar circumstances. Thus, says O'Connor, if it happens to be the case that our world is one in which all causal relations are subsumed under general types, this is at best due to a contingent feature of the way in which causation occurs in our world. At heart, causation itself is understood to be a genuine and *singular* relation between distinct phenomena.

Now, applied to agent causation, the idea is this: for O'Connor, the agent brings about "immediately *executive* states of intention to act in various ways".<sup>162</sup> That is to say, the agent causes the onset of a state of determinate intention to act in the circumstances in question. The state of intention itself is understood to be a type of mental event that resolves the agent's uncertainty about which course of action to undertake in those circumstances, and is applicable and effective in multiple circumstances. The causal formation of the intention to act is itself understood as a simple mental event the onset of which then causes the relevant sequence of events that comprise the intended bodily action, when conditions are suitably normal and all goes well. The agent-causal relation so understood is made possible by the fact that the agent possesses distinctive causal powers that are grounded in or a byproduct of a range of internal properties, such that any agent who possesses "the relevant internal properties will *have it directly within his power* to cause any of a range

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<sup>162</sup> See *ibid.* p. 72, his italics.

of states of intention delimited by internal and external circumstances”.<sup>163</sup> Thus, the presence of the internal properties enables the agent to directly bring about the requisite state of intention to act, which then brings about the intended bodily action, when conditions are suitably normal and all goes well. The causal powers that the agent possesses are of the same fundamental kind as those that are possessed by non-agent entities, but the key difference between them is the way in which the causal powers are *exercised*, where the causal powers that the agent possesses are exercised *by the agent himself*.

Crucially, for O’Connor, the fact that an agent has at any given moment in time the causal power to form an executive intention to act does not require that the causal power be exercised by the agent at that moment in time. The causal power is understood dispositionally, as standing ready to be exercised by the agent when the time comes. But if the bringing about of an executive intention is a simple mental event, and if the agent himself is the cause of this simple mental event, what explains the fact that this causal power is exercised by the agent at a particular moment in time?<sup>164</sup> The answer for O’Connor is that the agent’s motivational factors, such as his beliefs, desires, and other attitudes and emotional states, *incline* him to exercise the causal power at particular moments in time and locations in space.<sup>165</sup> That is, the motivational factors themselves do not *cause* the agent to exercise his causal power, but when they are present they serve to increase the likelihood that he will perform a particular action in that context. In fact, says O’Connor, *nothing*

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<sup>163</sup> See *ibid.* p. 72, his italics.

<sup>164</sup> This well-known line of objection was forcefully defended by C. D. Broad in “Determinism, Indeterminism, and Libertarianism”, in his *Ethics and the History of Philosophy: Selected Essays* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952).

<sup>165</sup> See, for example, his paper “Agent-Causal Power”, *op. cit.*, p. 197, where he says: “Thus, we cannot coherently suppose that the obtaining of a reason [or other motivational factor] in the agent may be said to be among the factors that causally *produce* the agent’s causing an intention....[Instead], the obtaining of the reason [or other motivational factor] appropriately affects (in the typical case, by increasing) an *objective propensity of the agent* to cause the intention” (his italics).

directly causes the agent to exercise his causal power on any given occasion, since the first element in the sequence of causally related events that lead from the onset of the intention to act to the intended bodily action is not an event, but a *particular substance*, namely, the agent himself. As such, substantial particulars have no causes whatsoever.

As the foregoing suggests, on O'Connor's view of agent causation, the agent is understood in a very unique manner.<sup>166</sup> First and foremost, the agent is conceived of as a particular substance, a kind of concrete entity that is capable of enduring through time and across alterations in some of its external relations and properties, and of being wholly present at each moment of an extended temporal interval, and no different *in this sense* from other particular substances, like tables, chairs, coffee mugs, and laptop computers. As a particular substance, the agent is understood to be an emergent biological entity that has mental properties and capacities that are not reducible to those of its constituent micro-properties, micro-capacities, and relations that exist between them.<sup>167</sup> According to O'Connor, some of those mental properties and capacities must enable the agent to represent to himself possible courses of action, and have beliefs and desires concerning the possibilities in question, and, crucially, the distinctive power of agency that the agent possesses must not be reducible to the powers of any of the properties that enable the agent to cause the relevant executive states of intention to act. The power to bring about an executive state of intention is thus unique at least insofar as when the appropriate conditions obtain, it is directly within the causal control of the agent himself.

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<sup>166</sup> O'Connor is admirably explicit that each of the following claims is highly contentious and would require elaborate defence in their own right (e.g., *Persons and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will*, op. cit., p. 73), but we can follow him by stating them as undefended presuppositions of his account of agent causation.

<sup>167</sup> See *ibid.* chapter 6, in which O'Connor defends the idea that the agent and the relevant causal powers are emergent properties.

#### 4. E. J. Lowe's account of Agent Causation

The fourth and final philosopher to be considered here is E. J. Lowe, who has recently offered his own, unique account of the notion of agent causation.<sup>168</sup> According to Lowe, *all* causation is *substance causation*.<sup>169</sup> Substances are understood to be *concrete entities* that persist through time, are capable of surviving certain kinds of changes and of participating in certain kinds of events. Crucially, for Lowe, *only* substances possess causal powers and causal liabilities. Events are thus causally inert, and are incapable of *doing* anything and so incapable of *causing* anything. As a result, when one speaks of one event causing another, says Lowe, one is in fact making a claim to the effect that a substance, by doing something in a particular type of way, caused the event in question. For example, when one says “The explosion of the bomb caused the collapse of the bridge”, one is understood to be saying that “The bomb, by exploding, caused the collapse of the bridge”.

Now, for Lowe, the notion of an agent is the idea of a particular substance (i.e., a concrete entity) that possesses causal powers and causal liabilities, that persists through time and across various sorts of changes, and that participates in certain kinds of events. Human beings and many other non-human animals, as well as things like tables, chairs, coffee mugs, and laptop computers are thus understood as agents in this general sense. In the specific context of human beings and the kinds of actions that they perform, when an agent causes an event, the agent does so *by acting* in

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<sup>168</sup> See his book *Personal Agency: The Metaphysics of Mind and Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>169</sup> See *ibid.* p. 4 and especially chapters 6 and 8. I should note here that I find Lowe's account of substance causation to be both interesting and persuasive, though I shall not argue for its correctness as an account of the notion of causation in general.

some manner. In particular, the agent causes the event *by willing to cause an event of that type*.<sup>170</sup>

The agent's act of will is understood by Lowe to be an act of volition, which is a primitive action of the agent. It is primitive in the sense that there is no more basic action that the agent performs and which causes the volition in question.<sup>171</sup> In fact, says Lowe, performing an act of will in this sense is the most basic kind of action that an intelligent agent can perform.<sup>172</sup> It is a species of *mental event* that has an executive function and that possesses a determinate intentional content; a volition is always a volition *to do such-and-so*, to cause an event of such-and-so type, which it does when all goes well in the appropriate conditions. In this way, the notion of a volition for Lowe is like that of a decision or choice.<sup>173</sup>

In addition, for Lowe, when an act of will—the making of a choice or decision—is performed rationally, the onset of that act is always a *completely uncaused* event, entirely spontaneous in its emergence, caused neither by prior events nor by the agent himself. Thus, when the agent employs his power of choice or decision in light of his assessment of the considerations that support his so doing, his act is not caused by anything, neither the agent himself nor by anything else, since, Lowe believes, its being caused in any way would be incompatible with the choice or decision being

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<sup>170</sup> This point is important and was discussed in chapter one. Briefly, for Lowe, the intentional object of an act of will is not a specific action, but a particular *type* of action, such as “right-arm rising”. Crucially, the specific and minute details of the motion of the arm in question are *not* controlled by the agent's act of will, but presumably by some feature of the agent's central nervous system.

<sup>171</sup> Note here the importance of the notion of a primitive action. Lowe's notion of a primitive action is similar to the notion of a basic action as it was introduced above and employed by Chisholm and Taylor. Lowe makes explicit reference (see *ibid.* p. 125, note 3) to a paper by Arthur Danto entitled “Basic Actions”, in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 2, Number 2, April 1965, pp. 141-148.

<sup>172</sup> This claim limits the account of action that Lowe provides, by suggesting that it is only *intelligent* agents who can perform actions in this sense. I addressed this point in chapter one.

<sup>173</sup> Indeed, he says so explicitly. See *op. cit.* p. 155: “Willing is *choosing* a course of action, normally in preference to some other course of action: choosing, say, to raise one's arm rather than to leave it down”. And: “[We] conceive of [the will] as being a power that is characteristically exercised *in the light of reason*. We conceive of it, that is to say, as being a *rational power*” (his italics).

performed rationally. It would be incompatible because causal processes are understood to bring about their effects in a manner that is not responsive to the whether or not the effect in question has cogent reasons in its favor.<sup>174</sup> Thus, when the act of will to do such-and-so is performed rationally, it must be *simply performed* or *immediately executed by* the agent. Crucially, this kind of relationship is not causal but internal to the agent, in the way that bodily sensations are internal. For example, to say that “He felt pain in his toe” is redundant in a way that saying that “He felt a rock on his toe” is not, since the notion of pain *just is* the notion of a bodily sensation. Thus, claims Lowe, strictly speaking, to say that “He felt pain in his toe” is a tautologous way of saying that the agent “sensed” a sensation. Analogously, then, when speaking of an agent performing an act of will, we are saying that the agent “performed” a performing, which is equally tautologous. The more appropriate way of expressing the idea is to say something simple like “He willed to do such-and-so”.

Moreover, according to Lowe, the act of willing itself does not consist in the agent causing a bodily or mental *action*. Since an agent can will such-and-so but *fail* to bring it about, the act of will *itself* cannot be understood as causal. By *willing to do such-and-so* when the requisite conditions obtain, the agent can play an essential role in causing the relevant bodily or mental event to occur, but acts of will are causes not of actions, but of what Lowe calls “action-results”.<sup>175</sup> Action-results are contrasted with actions. For example, the action of raising an arm is distinct from the event of arm-rising that sometimes occurs as a result of such an action, and at other times occurs by a different means.<sup>176</sup> Acts of will are causes of action-results only insofar as they consist in the agent’s exercising

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<sup>174</sup> See *op. cit.* p. 156: “To act for a reason is to act in a way that is responsive to the cogency of certain considerations in favour of one’s so acting—and this is incompatible with one’s being *caused* to act in that way, because causal processes bring about their effects with complete indifference to the question of whether those effects have cogent considerations in their favour” (his italics).

<sup>175</sup> See *ibid.* p. 148.

<sup>176</sup> It is worth noting that the contrast between what Lowe calls “action-results” and actions is not uncontroversial.

his will *and* when all goes well in the appropriate conditions his doing so brings about the resulting action-result. Thus, in the case of a basic bodily action, such as the motion of an arm, the agent causes the action in question *without* causing an intermediary bodily action that serves as a means by which the motion of the arm in question is brought about, but the agent does *do* something, namely, he *wills* to perform a bodily action of precisely that kind. And in the case of a basic mental action, such as that of employing the faculty of memory to recall some information, the agent causes the action in question *without* causing an intermediary mental action that serves as a means by which the faculty in question is activated, but the agent does *do* something, namely, he *wills* to perform a mental action of precisely that kind. In both scenarios, the agent's willing is understood to be a basic mental action, that of choosing or deciding to perform the kind of action in question, but according to Lowe, the basic mental action of willing to do such-and-so is itself *neither causal nor caused*.<sup>177</sup> It is not causal because it can *fail* to bring about the sought-for action-result; and it is not caused by the agent or by something internal or external to the agent, but it is a *spontaneous ability* that can be exercised by the agent in light of the considerations that he deems to support his so doing on any given occasion.

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<sup>177</sup> See, for example, *ibid.* p. 150: "Thus, an exercise of my will consists, in itself, *merely* in my willing to do something, *not* in my actually doing that thing as a consequence of my so willing" (his italics). And: "Because the will is a power, but is neither a causal power nor a causal liability, I shall call it a *spontaneous power*" (again, his italics). I addressed both issues in chapter one.