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24.120 Moral Psychology
Spring 2009

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XVI Free Will IV: Libertarianism

KANE

Kane is a libertarian. But unlike most libertarians (e.g. Taylor, Chisholm and Clarke), he rejects agent causation, i.e. the thesis that is defined by the following two claims:

- (i) unlike the event causation that obtains elsewhere in nature (one event causes another event), free acts are caused by agents, i.e. by things, and not by events.
- (ii) when an agent causes a free act to happen, the agent is not caused (or is not determined) to act by anything else

In its stead he embraces the Teleological Intelligibility approach (i.e. the approach that makes the goal of the action intelligible; other writers call this, rather less grandiosely, 'event-causal libertarianism', to make clear the contrast with agent-causal libertarianism). Crucially, this involves rejecting (i); the version of (ii) that he accepts involves the claim that the agent is caused but is not determined to act.

Central to Kane's account is the idea that the agent causal account cannot resolve a tension between two ideas that it wants to respect:

- (I) The Explanation condition: the account gives us an explanation of why the agent did one thing rather than another. (This in turn is later broken into two parts: how the agent can produce the outcome, and how it can be done for a reason.)
- (II) The Ultimacy condition: the ultimate explanation of why the agent did one thing rather than another resides in the agent (that the agent did it) and nowhere else. (I have simplified Kane's presentation of these points)

Then the problem is as follows: the Ultimacy condition requires indeterminism. But undetermined events cannot, by their nature, be explained. And so the Ultimacy condition is incompatible with the Explanation condition.

Before looking at Kane's account, it is worth asking in what sense undetermined events cannot be explained. Take a genuinely chance event: for instance, suppose that a given radium atom decays at a certain time *t*. Suppose that that decay in turn causes an alarm to be triggered. Can we give an explanation of why the alarm goes off? In a sense we can: we mention the radium atom, and of how its decay interacted with the alarm. But in another sense we can't: we can't give an explanation of why the alarm went off *rather than didn't go off*. This is because we cannot give an explanation of why the radium atom decayed rather than didn't decay: its decay is undetermined. David Lewis, to whom this distinction is due, calls these different sorts of explanations 'plain' explanations and 'contrastive' explanations. In an indeterministic case we can give a plain explanation of why something happened, by charting the sequence of indeterministic events that led up to it. But we can't give a contrastive explanation of why that event happened *rather than some other*. And it seems that what we want in the free will discussion is a contrastive explanation: we want to know why the agent did one thing rather than another.

Can the agent causation theorist escape from this dilemma? They want the agent to come in and resolve the indeterminacy. That is highly mysterious in itself. Worse, it looks as though that cannot amount to an explanation of why they did it. If we say: 'they did it because that was what they wanted to do' (or something like that) then we have returned to a model of event causation: it is the event of wanting the outcome that caused the agent to do it. This violates (i). Furthermore, now we seem to be back in a situation in which that want is likely to be caused by something outside of the agent, which violates (ii).

Kane wants an account that respects both The Explanation Condition and The Ultimacy Condition. He thinks that free will arises in cases of deliberation. Suppose an agent is debating whether to do the moral or the selfish thing. They are pulled in both directions. The conflict is resolved by a 'effort of will', that results in a choice. Suppose that they decide to do the good thing. Then there are factors that cause the decision (the agent's beliefs about what is right, their weighing of the circumstances, and so on); so this is not agent causation. But the decision is nonetheless indeterministic: it is not determined by those factors. (One way of thinking about this is to imagine two agents, with the same history, one of whom chooses one way, and one of whom chooses the other. What is to explain the difference?)

Doesn't this mean that there is no explanation as demanded by The Explanation Condition? Of course there is a plain explanation of why they did what they did. But we are after a contrastive explanation. Can this be given? I think that this is the question Q that is raised on p. 245. Kane says that the answer to this is that the agent came to believe that the reasons on which they acted were the best reasons (even, note, in cases of *akrasia*). But why did they come to believe this? The answer is simply that this is what they chose. So the explanation is circular. (See also his response to Objection I on p. 247)

Kane tries to argue that the circularity doesn't matter, but doesn't it really amount to the admission that there is no answer as to why the agent chose one course rather than the other?

Moreover, if the circular account is acceptable, can't the agent causal libertarian make use of it? The problem that Kane raises for the agent causal libertarian look more like problems for all libertarians. Nonetheless there may well be reasons, if one wants to be a libertarian, for preferring Kane's view to an agent causal approach. It is hard to see how to make sense of agent causation given standard accounts of causation (e.g. a counterfactual approach).