

FREE AGENT AS THE CAUSE AND THE ORINATION ARGUMENT

Naheed Saeed

Assistant Professor

Govt. Cooper road Collage, Lahore, Pakistan.

Abstract. The free human agent's capacity to make conscious, intentional and voluntary choices is compared to the deterministic causation of natural events in the framework of a causal chain. It is termed as agent causation by Clark and O'Connor, endorsed by Chisholm and defined as the idea that new causal chains that are not pre-determined by the prior conditions of the physical laws of nature can be initiated by the agent. Such a metaphysical agency is based on what is called the Origination Argument. The agent control and the causal relation between him and his actions may be undermined by indeterminate causation. Agent causation can neither be reduced to event causation, and therefore, as pointed out by Inwagen, cannot offer a solution to the free will dilemma. His Mind Argument furnishes him the ground to term agent causation as metaphysically incoherent, impossible and mysterious. It is argued that a genuine concept of agent causation should, at least, help to explain human behavior. It should be capable of playing a useful role in a theory of the production and explanation of human action. The major issues that need to be addressed act of origination may be explained and that of cause without being caused. The paper concludes by claiming that an act of origination cannot be explained as an effect of a prior cause and it cannot be explained in the context of scientific cause-effect relation.

Key Words: Free Agent, Agent control, Agent causation, Event causation, Causal chain, Deterministic causation, Indeterministic causation, Origination.

Agency in philosophy is construed as the capacity of an agent to act in a world. It may either be an intentional action, goal directed, purposeful activity or an involuntary, unconscious behavior. In the goal directed, purposeful action an agent is supposed to exercise a sort of direct control over his own behavior; hence he is said to have some kind of immediate consciousness of the physical activity and the targeted

goals. The human agent's capacity to make choices is contrasted to the deterministic causation of natural events in the framework of a causal chain. Though agency is subtly distinguished from the philosophical idea of free will claiming undetermined choices free of the constraint of a causal chain where prior events determine the cause of future events, the former nevertheless entitles human beings to make decisions and act upon them. Notwithstanding the agent's capacity to make a free choice or not, the outcome of his acts invests him with moral responsibility. The ambiguity inherent in the idea that free actions are directly caused by random action continues to vitiate the idea of agent responsibility for chance events.

A number of philosophical writing appearing in recent years (pre-eminently those by Randolph Clarke and Timothy O'Connor) has used the notion of agent causation to give an account of free human agency. Agent-Causality is defined as the idea that new causal chains that are not pre-determined by the prior conditions of the physical laws of nature can be initiated by the agent. The idea is that human beings have some kind of metaphysical agency that cannot be explained in terms of physical causes. This line of thought is based on the argument that an agent has free will when he acts with free will only if he originates his action, as the first cause or the ultimate source of his action. One can make a formal version of the Origination Argument. The originator of his action is only the agent who acts with free will. Supposing determinism to be true, everything an agent does is caused, in the final analysis, by events and circumstances that lie outside his control, in which case he is not the originator of his actions. Therefore, the truth of determinism implies that no agent is the originator of his actions. The claim that determinism is true implies that no agent has free will. The proponents of such a formulation of incompatibilists argument would claim that agents do not cause their actions in a way required for free will and, ultimately, moral responsibility.

Theorists who argue for agent causation claim that free human beings have, unlike inanimate beings, the capacity to introduce something new in the world by an act of free will, they initiate new causal chains. No one is the cause of their causing the event they cause. As active, self-determining beings; they are the causes of their own behavior. In case of a free action we look for an action that is caused by the performing agent, but such that no antecedent conditions were sufficient for his performing just that action. While considering an action that is both free and rational, we look for reasons for which the

agent performed it, but this reason cannot be taken to have been the cause of it. Chisholm justifies why he endorses the concept of agent-causation:

“The notion of immanent causation, or causation by an agent, in fact more clearly than that of transient causation, or causation by an event, and that it is only by understanding our own causal efficacy, as agents, that we can grasp the concept of cause at all. Hume may be said to have shown that we do not derive the concept of cause from what we perceive of external things. How, then, do we derive it? The most plausible suggestion, it seems to me, is that of Reid, once again: namely that ‘the conception of an efficient cause may very probably be derived from the experience we have had . . . of our own power to produce certain effects’. If we did not understand the concept of immanent causation, we would not understand that of transient causation.”¹

Agent Causation is the alternate view that affirms that the agent controls his action only if there is a direct causal relation between the agent and the action. If an agent’s volitions are not produced by the deterministic causal chain extending beyond the agent, the volitions are either uncaused or are indeterministically caused. In case of uncaused volitions, one may not be able to assign to the agent origination as the ultimate source of volitions. An indeterministic causation may also undermine an agent’s control over his volitions. These constraints have encouraged some incompatibilists to see volitions caused directly by the agent. They try to make a clear distinction between agent causation and event causation, the former being involved in free will. Many philosophers point out incoherence of agent causation thesis. But, the proponents of agent causation, nevertheless, treat agents as enduring substances directly wielding the power to cause volitions. Neither is there any reason here to look for similarity of relation between agent causation and event causation. There are no logical grounds to draw a parallel between one case relating an agent with an event and the other case relating an event with an event as Randolph Clarke seems to do:

“The relation that obtains between cause and effect in an instance of agent causation is the very same relation that obtains between cause and effect in an instance of event causation.”²

Nor is agent causation reducible to event causation. Can we explain event causation understood in terms of determinism? In the world of events causes and explanations are interchangeable. When agents are moved, they require agent or personal or immanent causation which is not compatible with determinism. It cannot, therefore, be understood in

the model typically applied situations of event causation. Peter van Inwagen argues that “agent causation offers no remedy for the free will dilemma; it ‘is entirely irrelevant to the problem of freewill’”.³

Peter van Inwagen’s argument against agent causation, also known as the “Mind Argument,” is directed at explaining how indeterminism and free will are incompatible. In other words, the role of indeterminism in the causal chain that leads to agent’s action undermines free will by making relevant actions seem random and consequently not free. The two tier argument proceeds thus: (1) an intuitive version of the argument against indeterministic theories of free will making no use of agent causation; (2) a suggestion that bringing in agent causation does not hinder the argument. It is, therefore, either an argument for the conclusion that Incompatibilism entails the absence of free will, or it is an argument for the conclusion that certain ways that indeterministic causation can enter into the causation of action preclude free will. Peter van Inwagen formulates the argument thus:

“The Mind argument proceeds by identifying indeterminism with chance and by arguing that an act that occurs by chance, if an event that occurs by chance can be called an act, cannot be under the control of its alleged agent and hence cannot have been performed freely. Proponents of [this argument] conclude, therefore, that free will is not only compatible with determinism but entails determinism.”⁴

With his acute appreciation of the problem of free will, van Inwagen tends to agree with the critics of the concept of agent-causation treating it as incoherent and metaphysically impossible. Van Inwagen’s later writings treat free will as a mystery irrespective of the reality of agent-causation emerging as a fact in the antecedents of every voluntary movement. Elaborating with the help of a thought experiment, Peter van Inwagen asserts:

“If God caused Marie’s decision to be replayed a very large number of times, sometimes (in thirty percent of the replays, let us say) Marie would have agent-caused the crucial brain event and sometimes (in seventy percent of the replays, let us say) she would not have... I conclude that even if an episode of agent causation is among the causal antecedents of every voluntary human action, these episodes do nothing to undermine the prima facie impossibility of an undetermined free act.”⁵

In a more recent article, van Inwagen reverts to the incoherence of the concept of free will and says:

“There are seemingly unanswerable arguments that (if they are indeed unanswerable) demonstrate that free will is incompatible with determinism. And there are seemingly unanswerable arguments that... demonstrate that free will is incompatible with indeterminism. But if free will is incompatible both with determinism and indeterminism, the concept 'free will' is incoherent, and the thing free will does not exist.”⁶

It is obvious that van Inwagen's argument is not directed at discrediting the concept of agent causation. Nor does it show whether we have free will or what free will is and how does it work. A genuine concept of agent causation should, at least, help to explain human behavior. It should be capable of playing a useful role in a theory of the production and explanation of human action. Even van Inwagen's less “mysterious” rendering of the notion does no more than mark the problem for which the libertarian seeks a solution. How, according to is the act of origination to be explained in the light of agent causation theory? Since nothing causes it, it is not possible to explain an act of origination as an effect of a prior cause. It is not possible here to give a cause-effect explanation. Neither can we give a scientific explanation. On the agent causation view, therefore, free will remains unexplained. The whole idea is either mysterious or miraculous.

End Notes

1 Chisholm, Roderick. *Human Freedom and the Self, Free Will*, edited by R. Kane, Oxford: Blackwell, (1964), P. 28

2 Clarke, Randolph. "Agent Causation and Event Causation in the Production of Free Action", *Philosophical Topics* 24, 19-48, (1996): P. 21

3 Inwagen, Peter van. "Free Will Remains a Mystery", *Philosophical Perspectives* 14, 1-19, (2000): P. 11

4 Inwagen, Peter van. *Essay on Free Will*, Oxford: Blackwell, (1983): P.16

5 Inwagen, Peter van. "Van Inwagen on Free Will", *Freedom and Determinism*, ed. Joseph Keim Campbell, (2004): P.227

6 Inwagen, Peter van. "How to think about the problem of free will", *The Journal of Ethics* (3-4): 327-341,(2008): Pp. 327-328