

Agent Causation, or, How to Be a Soft Libertarian

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for the Southwest Regional meeting of the Evangelical Philosophical Society

A Soft Libertarian View of Agent Causation

Why do people do what they do? I am not asking about motives *per se*, but about how we account for human action. For example, why did John X enroll as a student at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary? If we trust John's account, he suggests that he made his decision at the end of a lengthy process of deliberation. He sought the advice of trusted ministers, he consulted family and friends, he visited four seminaries, and he sought God's guidance through prayer. Ultimately, he said that he felt led to choose this seminary over the others he had visited because our seminary had some features that the other seminaries did not.

However, others cast John's decision in a profoundly different light. A friend who serves as Dean at one of the other seminaries John considered happens to be strongly Calvinistic. His take on John's coming to our seminary was that it had nothing to do with the relative strengths of our faculties or student enlistment personnel. God had simply predestined and decreed that John come to our seminary from before the foundation of the world, and no human actions could mitigate this decree without God sacrificing His sovereignty.¹ The Dean asserted that "not one drop of rain falls without God's sure command,"² and that "God by His secret bridle so holds and governs (persons)

¹ John Frame defines "God's decretive will" as His "highly mysterious" purpose that "governs whatever comes to pass." John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1994), 175.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, The Library of Christian Classics 20, 21 (London: SCM Press, 1960), I.16.4-5. Calvin also asserts God's meticulous providence in

that they cannot move even one of their fingers without accomplishing the work of God much more than their own.”³ As my friend put it, “God controls all persons and events equally” through divine providence and predestination, and this control is necessary because “God could hardly exercise care over them without having control over it.”⁴ John’s coming to NOBTS was not against his will, however; he freely assented to come to our seminary because it lined up with his desires and other previous events and states of affairs. As the Dean put it, “He [God] exercises his control, as far as men and women are concerned, not apart from what they want to do, or (generally speaking) by compelling them to do what they do not want to do, but through their wills.” However, my Dean friend asserted, John literally could not have chosen any of the other seminaries he visited.

A third seminary that John visited has a radically postmodernist Dean. His perspective was also that John himself had little to do with coming to our seminary. John’s coming to our seminary was simply the causal result of the contingent prior events and states of affairs in John’s life (his genetic, social, economic, and psychological background). The postmodernist Dean claimed that John’s choice was just as much “a contingency, as much a result of thousands of small mutations finding niches (and millions of others finding no niches), as are the orchids and the anthropoids.”⁵ In

matters such as which mothers have milk and others do not (*Institutes*, I.16.3).

³John Calvin, *A Defence (sic) of the Secret Providence of God, by which He Executes His Eternal Decrees*, trans. Henry Cole (London: Sovereign Grace Union, 1927), 238.

⁴ Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*, Contours of Christian Theology series, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994),

⁵ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 16. Rorty makes this claim not merely about a particular human action, but all human language and culture. Ironically, some Calvinists also subscribe to this doctrine of radical contingency. For example, Pollard argues that the illusion of free choice between viable alternatives is dispelled when we recognize that “[T]he *I*, too, is seen to be controlled by things and instincts, the product of its given heredity and environment.” William G. Pollard, *Chance*

fact, my postmodernist friend asserted, what John described as a choice was actually the result of “cosmic rays scrambling the fine structure of some crucial neurons” in his brain or of “some odd episodes in infancy—some obsessional kinks left in these brains by idiosyncratic *traumata*.”⁶

Which of these accounts of John coming to seminary do you believe? Does the behavior of persons result from deliberate decisions or from antecedent causes? Your answer to that question expresses your *action theory*. I believe that John was essentially correct in his self-description of his actions, and after his seminary career (if he takes some Philosophy classes) perhaps he would know that this expresses an action theory of agent causation. In this paper, I would like to propose that agent causation is not only an essential component of a coherent action theory, but it is also consistent with biblical anthropology. In particular, I shall argue that agent causation is compatible with a high view of the sovereignty of God, while allowing a significant and meaningful human freedom of choice (namely, a soft libertarian position in which persons exhibit creaturely freedom).

Agent causation is a voluntaristic action theory that accounts for deliberately chosen human actions (i.e., not under compulsion) as the result of an intention formation and execution process in which the choice/decision⁷ of a person/self/agent⁸ is both the necessary and determinative causal

and Providence: God's Action in the World Governed by Scientific Law (London: Feber and Faber, 1959), 66. So while some Calvinists who may parade under the banner of compatibilism, in fact they are hard determinists.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17. The specific reference Rorty makes in this citation is to Aristotle's metaphorical use of *ousia*, Saint Paul's metaphorical use of *agape*, and Newton's metaphorical use of *gravitas*.

⁷ In this paper I will (as much as possible) refer to freedom of choice rather than freewill, simply because the term “freewill” has its own baggage. The issue of will is vitally related to agent causation and soft libertarian freedom, but space does not permit a detailed exposition of this connection. As John Locke said it so aptly, “the question is not “whether the will be free” but “whether a man be free.” John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, bk. ii, ch. 21, sect. 14, “Liberty belongs not to the will,” an online version of this book is accessible at <http://www.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/Philosophy/Locke/echu/>. However, for an excellent survey on

element of action.⁹ Agent causation is often contrasted with event causation,¹⁰ in which antecedent events or states of affairs cause other events or states of affairs.¹¹ In event causation, prior events or

views of free will, see Ilham Dilman, *Free Will: An Historical and Philosophical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1999). For how human freedom interacts with divine sovereignty, see Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000); and Basinger, David and Randall, eds. *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom by John Feinberg, Norman Geisler, Bruce Reichenbach, and Clark Pinnock* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986).

⁸ Although *person*, *self*, and *agent* are clearly distinguishable terms in various linguistic contexts, for this paper I am going to take them as synonymous. Space does not permit the development of a thoroughgoing anthropology, so for this paper I will simply utilize “person/self/agent” as a course-grained broad designation for a personal self.

⁹ I agree largely with the action theory proposed by Hugh McCann in *The Works of Agency: On Human Action, Will, and Freedom* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); c.f. McCann’s “Intrinsic Intentionality,” *Theory and Decision* 20 (1986), 247-273; “Rationality and the Range of Intention,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 10 (1986), 191-211; “Settled Objectives and Rational Constraints,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (January 1991), 25-36; “Trying, Paralysis, and Volition,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 28, no. 3 (March 1975), 423-442; and “Volition and Basic Action,” *The Philosophical Review* 83 (October 1974), 451-473.

¹⁰ The most definitive problem with event causation when applied to human action is its assertion of nomic causal determinism. Causal determinism is the doctrine that all events can be explained by causal antecedents. As Roderick Chisholm reminds us, the concept of causation is nomological, presupposing “physical necessity, a concept that is usually expressed by reference to the laws of nature.” Roderick Chisholm, “Agents, Causes, and Events: The Problem of Free Will,” in *Agents, Causes, and Events*, ed. Timothy O’Connor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 97. Chisholm distinguishes two types of necessity--laws of logic (in every possible world, if a then b), and the laws of nature. While the laws of nature obviously affect humans, they do not govern human decisions. Reducing all explanation to physical causation is a leap of categories and epistemic imperialism.

¹¹ The definitions of “event” and “causation” are not agreed to universally, introducing some ambiguity to this discussion. *Events* can be seen as course-grained types broadly described by general non-rigid designators, or as fine-grained tokens described narrowly and precisely by a rigid designator. Three salient approaches to accounting for *causation* are nomological/regularity theory, counterfactual analysis, and probabilistic analysis. My own perspective favors the more precise approach in which events are fine-grained, temporally saturated rigidly designated tokens, and I believe that counterfactual and probabilistic analyses are most helpful in accounting for human-initiated events. These issues are relevant to this proposal for agent causation, but space does not permit time to develop these arguments fully. However, these views of events and

states of affairs are the sufficient causal conditions for action (or the INUS conditions for action)¹². On the other hand, agent causation is the view that “if a man is responsible for a particular deed . . . there is some event, or set of events, that is caused, *not* by other events or states of affairs, but by the man himself, by the agent.”¹³ Agent causation thus presupposes at least what I shall call a soft libertarian view of freedom in which humans exhibit a creaturely freedom to choose within limited alternatives without being predetermined by prior events, states of affairs, desires, or judgments. A *soft libertarian* view of freedom, like all libertarian views, defines freedom as the ability to do otherwise in any given decision. The label “soft” libertarian is to differentiate it from hard libertarian views in which persons are said to determine events entirely on their own without external influence. A soft libertarian perspective acknowledges the incredible influence that external forces exert on our decision making process, but still insists that the final decision remains with the agent. To cite

causation are not essential to this approach to agent causation; agent causation can be modified to be compatible with each of these approaches to events and to causation.

¹² John L. Mackie defines C as an INUS condition of E if C is an insufficient but non-redundant part of the unnecessary but sufficient condition of the occurrence of E. See John L. Mackie, *The Cement of the Universe: A Study of Causation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 60-63; and Mackie, “Causes and Conditions,” in *Causation*, ed. Ernest Sosa and Michael Tooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 33-55. “INUS” stands for Insufficient but Necessary part of a condition which is Unnecessary but Sufficient to produce the result.

¹³ Roderick Chisholm, “Freedom and Action,” in *Freedom and Determinism*, ed. Keith Lehrer (New York: Random House, 1966), 17. Chisholm often uses the term “transuent causation” rather than event causation, and he understands “immanent causation” and “non-occurrent causation” to be synonymous with agent causation. See Chisholm, “Human Freedom and the Self,” in *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 28; and Chisholm, “On the Logic of Intentional Action,” in *Agent, Action and Reason*, ed. R. Binkley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 48.

Leibniz's famous phrase, these external influences "incline the will without necessitating it."¹⁴

The Earlier Chisholmian Account of Event Causation

Since Roderick Chisholm has been one of the major advocates of agent causation,¹⁵ I will survey his arguments for agent causation, his refinements of his position, and his answers to objections to his version of agent causation will be surveyed, and then I will offer some suggestions to buttress the case for agent causation. Foundational to Chisholm's perspective is the presupposition of the reality of moral responsibility. For Chisholm, whether the purported cause is internal or external to the agent, "if the cause was some state or event for which the man himself was not responsible, then he was not responsible for what we have been mistakenly calling his act."¹⁶ Because of this commitment, Chisholm countenances neither determinism nor indeterminism with reference to human action.

Determinists such as Jonathan Edwards and G. E. Moore assert that determinism is compatible with human responsibility, such that the following two propositions are taken to be essentially identical:

- (a) She could have done otherwise.
- (b) If she had chosen (undertaken, decided, or willed) to do otherwise, then she would have done otherwise.

¹⁴ G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, sec. 336, in *Schriften*, 6.314. He used a similar phrase in his letter to Clarke, letter 5, sec. 8, in *Schriften*, 6.390.

¹⁵ His argument for agent causation is made explicitly in Roderick Chisholm, "Freedom and Action," in *Freedom and Determinism*, ed. Keith Lehrer (New York: Random House, 1966), 11-14; "The Agent as Cause," in *Action Theory*, ed. Myles Brand and Douglas Walton (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1976), 199-212; *Person and Object: A Metaphysical Study* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1976), 53-88; "Human Freedom and the Self," in *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 24-35; and "Agents, Causes, and Events," in *Agents, Causes, and Events*, ed. O'Connor, 95-100.

¹⁶ Chisholm, "Freedom and Action," 13.

Chisholm, however, rejects the identification of (a) and (b), because in some circumstances (b) could be true while (a) is false, so one cannot infer (a) from (b) unless we also assert:

(c) She could have chosen to do otherwise.

And, argues Chisholm, if we could not affirm (c), neither could we affirm (a). Thus determinism conflicts with a commitment to moral responsibility.¹⁷

Chisholm likewise rejects the description of human action by *random indeterminism* because random actions also fail to account for human responsibility.¹⁸ Most libertarians reject the label of “indeterminism” for human-initiated events because these events are not uncaused random accidents,

¹⁷ Chisholm, “Human Freedom and the Self,” 27-28; “Freedom and Action,” 11. Agent causation is *agent determined* or *self-determined* not in the sense of being oblivious to the givens and influences of life, but in the sense that the person chooses or determines the action. Agency action could be described as *adeterministic* or *undeterministic* in the sense that human actions are not ruled by nomic causal determinism. While human decisions may be vaguely predictable, they are ultimately antinomian, influenced by but not governed by any law, even a law of nature, and may not be reduced to genetics, sociology, or psychology. Determinists persistently attempt to subsume agent-initiated action under categories such as nomic necessity, the laws of nature, or nomic causation. All of these fail to do justice to the unique nature of the will of an agent. It is the person who initiates the action. Applied to history, determinists seek to apply a covering-law explanation to history, reducing history to biology. But one need merely reflect on the difference between an account of the explosion of a volcano and an account of the reasons leading up to a war to note that human decisions are not subject to laws in any meaningful way. Because they are the product of human decisions, historic events are unrepeatably and ideographic, not repeatable and nomothetic.

¹⁸ Chisholm, “Human Freedom and the Self,” 27-28; “Freedom and Action,” 11; and “Some Puzzles about Agency,” in *The Logical Way of Doing Things*, ed. K. Lambert (New Haven: Yale University Press), 199. The account of freedom being advocated here could also be called *anti-indeterministic*, however, because while not determined by nomic causation, neither does this view propose the kind of randomness exhibited in the indeterminacy of modern quantum physics (which poses just as much of a threat to meaningful choice as does determinism). Human choices are not random accidents, but willful determinations. Carl Ginet prefers “adeterminism” to “indeterminism” to avoid the suggestion of randomness in the indeterminism of quantum physics. See Carl Ginet, “Reasons Explanation of Action: An Incompatibilist Account,” in *Agents, Causes, and Events*, ed. O'Connor, 91. Ginet defines “an undetermined event” as “one that was not nomically necessitated by the antecedent state in the world,” and “a determined event” as “one that *was* nomically necessitated by its antecedents.” Ginet, 69.

but are caused by human agents. In the words of Robert Nozick, “It is neither necessary nor appropriate . . . to say the person's action is uncaused It is undetermined which act he will do,” keeping in mind the “distinction between an action's being caused, and its being causally determined,” because “‘uncaused’ does not entail ‘random.’”¹⁹ The agent causation Chisholm offers, then, is somewhat of an alternative between determinism and indeterminism.

As Thomas Reid had noted, we first encounter causation from our own power to produce effects, so it is through immanent (agent) causation that we come to understand transeunt (event) causation. Using Aristotle’s analogy of a stone that is moved by the staff, which is moved by a hand, which is moved by a man,²⁰ Chisholm argues that some actions are irreducibly caused by agents; when we act as agents we are prime movers unmoved. Chisholm thus eschews the Hobbesian approach (in which actions are causally favored by desires), endorsing instead the Kantian approach (in which there is no necessary logical or causal connection between wanting and doing). Of course, we cannot always do what we will (*actus imperatus*), but we will what we do (*actus elicitus*).²¹ There cannot truly be, then, a “science of man” which investigates human action solely in terms of antecedent events. Again citing Thomas Reid, Chisholm argues that although we may reason (often with great probability) from persons’ reasons to their actions, one cannot do so with absolute certainty. Citing Leibniz, Chisholm asserts that prior beliefs and desires “incline without necessitating.”²²

¹⁹ Robert Nozick, “Choice and Indeterminism,” in *Agents, Causes, and Events*, ed. O'Connor, 102, 104-105.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Physics*, VII, 5, 26a, 6-8.

²¹ Chisholm, “Human Freedom and the Self,” 28-32.

²² *Ibid.*, 31-33.

The Later Chisholmian Account of Agent Causation

Chisholm later had second thoughts about his fundamental distinction between agent and event causation, and came to believe that agent causation could be a subspecies of event causation. He assumed that “most investigators” understood the concept of causation as nomological, presupposing physical necessity according to the laws of nature (as opposed to logical necessity according to the laws of logic).²³ In this nomological system, Chisholm argued, it was a common error to confuse *partial* or *contributing* causes with *sufficient causal conditions*. Chisholm defined sufficient causal conditions not by reference to a set of states or events, but to the properties of the contents of states or events. S as a *sufficient causal condition* of E if:

S is a set of properties such that the conjunction of its members does not logically imply E; and it is a law of nature that, if all the members of S are exemplified by the same thing at the same time, the E will be exemplified either at that time or later.²⁴

In contrast, C is a *minimal sufficient causal condition* of E if:

C is a sufficient causal condition of E; and no subset of C is a sufficient causal condition of E.²⁵

One member of the minimal sufficient causal condition of an event is a partial cause (not the sufficient cause). The *partial cause* (“the state which is x-being C”) contributes causally to “that state which is y-being-E” if:

C is a member of a set S of properties that are all exemplified by x at the same time, and S is a minimal sufficient causal condition of E.²⁶

Chisholm accounts for the various instantiations in cases of overdetermination (such as more than one

²³ Chisholm, “Agents, Causes, and Events,” 95.

²⁴ Ibid., 97-98.

²⁵ Ibid., 98.

²⁶ Ibid., 98.

bullet from a firing squad striking the victim at the same time) as being partial or contributing causes. Each bullet contributed to killing the victim, but all the shots are not a part of a minimal sufficient causal condition.²⁷

In his revised account, then, Chisholm includes agents within the causal chain of event causation. Agent causation is a subspecies, not an alternative, to event causation. Agent A may contribute causally to the occurrence of an event, but only as a partial or contributing cause, not as either a minimal or a sufficient condition.

A Defense of Agent Causation

Several significant objections have been raised concerning the rationality or intelligibility of the Chisholmian account of agent causation. One version of what might be called the *rationality objection* raises the issue of just how the agent, her reasons for action, and her action are interrelated. Some ask, for instance, how the agent's decision is causally related to the agent's brain. Does the agent's mind consciously move the brain, which in turn moves the hand to move the staff and the rock? To answer this challenge, Chisholm points to the distinction between *doing* (consciously causing effects) and *making something happen* (causing effects about which we may not be conscious). Agents make cerebral events happen (immanent/agent causation), and the cerebral events bring about the event by transeunt (event) causation. The agent caused the brain activity, but "there was nothing that he did to cause it."²⁸

Another version of the rationality objection asks how a human agent can be an uncaused cause. Irving Thalberg, for example, is baffled by Chisholm's claim that a responsible act done by an agent

²⁷ Ibid., 98.

²⁸ Chisholm, "Human Freedom and the Self," 29-31.

has no sufficient causal condition. Thalberg offers Chisholm one of two alternatives--a deterministic event causation or randomly indeterministic causation. In the event causation, beliefs, desires, and other such motivational states are at least part of a sufficient causal condition for an action. In a randomly indeterministic account of causation, if we have no such reasons, our acts are truly capricious.²⁹ In his earlier account, Chisholm was willing to “bite the bullet” and simply assert that “there was nothing that he [the agent] did to cause it [the action].”³⁰ But in the later Chisholmian account, he somewhat mitigates this objection by placing agents within the causal stream. His answer to Thalberg’s objection is that “[t]he agent does have his reasons, . . . (but) [h]is reasons are *not* sufficient causal conditions for what he does.”³¹ Reasons are not necessarily sufficient causal conditions for action (nor even causal factors or partial causes) because persons often choose not to do things despite having good reasons for doing so. Chisholm offers the example of a man atop a pedestal upon whom intolerable heat is directed. The man could jump off the pedestal in any direction, but he believes that westward is a poor choice. Despite these strong factors, Chisholm asserts, the man is still free to jump in any direction. The agent is not the only causal factor, but is the determinative causal factor.

A third version of the intelligibility objection demands greater clarity in explaining why the event takes place at a particular time, rather than earlier or later.³² In Clarke’s suggested revision of the Chisholmian account of agent causation, the occurrence of some prior events could be a necessary

²⁹ Irving Thalberg, “Agent Causality and Reasons for Acting,” *Philosophia* 7 (July 1978), 564.

³⁰ Chisholm, “Human Freedom and the Self,” 31.

³¹ Roderick M. Chisholm, “Comments and Replies,” *Philosophia* 7 (July 1978), 628.

³²This objection is expressed in C. D. Broad, *Ethics and the History of Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 215.

condition of an agent causing an event because without the prior events the later event would not be naturally possible. It is naturally possible at time t “that an event E occur (in our world) at time t' just in case there is at least one possible world with the same laws of nature as ours and with a history exactly like ours up through time t in which E occurs at t' .”³³ Thus the prior events can account for the timing of an action in agent-causal explanations in essentially the same way as event-causal explanations.

Some Modest Suggestions

Since I largely agree with Chisholmian agent causation (especially the earlier version), I can offer only modest suggestions for improvements to his account. First, Chisholm's theory could be enhanced by more careful attention to other varieties of causation than the regularity theory and its nomological account of causation in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.³⁴ Chisholm deals almost exclusively with nomological regularity causation because he deems it to be the scholarly consensus. This was likely true when he wrote, but since that time counterfactual and probabilistic analyses of causation have been given eloquent expression.³⁵ As Peter van Inwagen notes, Chisholm's primary response to regularity theory is to deny its applicability to agent causation.³⁶ Chisholm does

³³ Randolph Clarke, “Toward a Credible Agent-Causal Account of Free Will,” *Noûs* 27, no. 2 (1993):192. This article was later republished with the same title in *Agents, Causes, and Events*, ed. O'Connor, 201-215.

³⁴One paradigmatic regularity theory account, see John L. Mackie, “Causes and Conditions,” in *Causation*, ed. Ernest Sosa and Michael Tooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 33-55.

³⁵A helpful description of counterfactual analysis of causation is in David Lewis, “Causation,” in *Causation*, ed. Sosa and Tooley, 193-204. A useful account of probability theory in causation is in Wesley C. Salmon, “Probabilistic Causation,” in *Causation*, ed. Sosa and Tooley, 137-153; and Ellery Eells, *Probabilistic Causality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

³⁶ Peter van Inwagen, “Immanent Causation,” *Philosophia* 7 (July 1978), 572.

hint at probabilistic causation in his citation of Thomas Reid that human actions cannot be described nomologically, but only probabilistically. And in his later writing Chisholm suggests a counterfactual claim: even though an agent may not have sufficient causal conditions for what she does, she will have indefinitely many necessary causal conditions which had they not occurred the agent would not have done what she did.³⁷

These hints offer fruitful entrees to counterfactual and probabilistic accounts of causality. Counterfactual analysis may offer only a slightly less deterministic and nomological account than the regularity theory. But as long as the role of the agent as undetermined determinator of action is vouchsafed, some limited use of counterfactual analysis with reference to potential reasons for action may be useful. As Clarke argues, the presence or absence of some previous causal contributors may make a later event naturally possible or impossible. An agent might say, "If I had not been sick, I would have gone to the basketball game." Being sick provided an adequate reason for not attending the game, and had she not been sick she would have not had this reason for nonattendance. So counterfactual analysis may be useful in assessing the existence of reasons for action, but not in accounting for the action itself. Counterfactual analysis of action fails to account adequately for the agent's "nonrandom weighting"³⁸ of conative, affective, and cognitive reasons, which are only in the purview of the agent.

Probabilistic theories of causation, however, appear to be more compatible with agent causation.³⁹ Since probabilistic accounts are not metaphysically deterministic, but offer only

³⁷ Chisholm, "Comments and Replies," 630.

³⁸ Nozick, "Choice and Indeterminism," 105-107.

³⁹ Clarke, 193.

epistemological assessments about the likelihood of an event, they do not impinge of the freedom of the agent. As Reid noted, given the relevant reasons which seem to affect a case, we may predict the likelihood of a certain course of events involving humans. Changes in the relevant events will affect the probabilities, since the changing situation affords different reasons for action. Such probabilistic judgments are fallible, of course, but in some cases may be very accurate. For instance, if I ask my family whether we want to eat at McDonald's or at Commander's Palace, I know with a degree of probability approaching 1 that my twelve-year-old son will choose McDonald's, and my wife will choose Commander's Palace. In fact, even persons who do not know my family could likely have predicted that outcome. But there is nothing deterministic in this assessment; they could have done otherwise, and occasionally they do in certain token events.

My second suggestion for Chisholm's account is that greater attention be given to the voluntaristic elements of action theory. Chisholm does not articulate a thoroughgoing action theory in connection with his writings on agent causation. Many of the issues raised regarding the intelligibility of agent causation would be addressed were Chisholm less reticent to enunciate an action theory which takes volition seriously. The absence of an explicit account of free will in Chisholm's account leads Thalberg to suggest that Chisholm was dissatisfied with the voluntaristic theories of Bentham, Austin, Mill, and Prichard.⁴⁰ This is something of an argument from silence, but it is true that Chisholm himself states that he has "avoided the term 'free will'" and develops his theory without reference to "such a faculty as 'the will' which somehow sets our acts agoing"⁴¹

⁴⁰ Thalberg, 555.

⁴¹ Chisholm, "Human Freedom and the Self," 32. I agree with Chisholm, however, that the meaning of the term "will" is ambiguous enough that it often is not fruitful to use this term without risking more confusion than understanding. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, I will avoid terms such as "freewill" and refer instead to "freedom of choice."

I would propose as an addendum to Chisholm's account a voluntaristic action theory that views persons as caused by the First Cause but not determined. The will of the self is not immune from external influences, but is the ultimate determinant of action.⁴² A randomizer machine can be caused, but its “decisions” cannot be predictably predetermined. Likewise, a child can be caused by the action of her parents, but her choices are not determined. A free moral agent is, then, a genuine originator of her actions. Antecedent givens, both external (genetic, socio-economic, and environmental) and internal (psychological, cognitive, conative, and affective) factors may strongly influence or (all things being held equal) predispose an agent to particular choices, but these factors are not sufficient or determinative alone. Again, such motivations “incline the will without necessitating it.”

I am thus basically affirming Chisholm's earlier version of agent causation (in that it accords a more determinative role to the agent) with the qualification that his earlier perspective does not take seriously enough the necessary role that antecedent events and states of affairs play. In particular, I am uncomfortable with his attribution of humans as “prime movers unmoved.” We are not prime movers in the same sense that God is the Prime Mover or Unmoved Mover, because God creates out of nothing. We only work with previously existing realities, so a more qualified view of agent causation with *soft* libertarian freedom is more accurate. On the other hand, Chisholm including humans within an INUS condition and within the stream of event causation in his later version of agent causation may go too far. Human decisions are not made in a vacuum; the antecedent conditions are necessary conditions of a specific event (for if these conditions were not present, the agent would not have anything to choose).

⁴²This account comes close to Mortimer Adler's view that in self-determining freedom “the individual's freedom of choice . . . rests with his power of self-determination, through its causal indeterminacy, is able to give dominance to one motive or one set of influences rather than another. Far from motives or other influences determining which of several decisions is made, it is the other way around . . . the self determines which motive or set of influences shall be decisive.” Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 2:232.

However, the antecedent conditions are not causally sufficient either individually or as a whole.

Without the personal choice of an agent, the antecedent conditions would have remained dormant, with only the potential for events. Only a personal human choice (separable from the stream of event causation) is both necessary and determinative in causing a human-initiated event.

In this account, then, the free will performs the decisive executive role in adjudicating between beliefs, desires, and emotions. This view of the self is not a schizophrenic division, but a psychosomatic unity directed by the will. The agent's beliefs, desires, preferences, aims, and values are nonrandomly assigned weights by the will. No deterministic account can adequately describe this weighting of reasons process; only probabilistic judgments can be proposed. Character and habit play a significant role in weighting potential reasons. There is something of a hermeneutical spiral in the decision-making process whereby character and act are interrelated. Character becomes the hermeneutical filter for new actions, but new actions may play a role in reshaping character. Sometimes new input can bring anything from small changes to a paradigm shift in character. Nozick uses the analogy of legal precedents to describe this dynamic interrelation:

The weights of reasons are inchoate until the decision. The decision need not bestow exact quantities, though, only make some reasons come to outweigh others The bestowed weights . . . set up a framework within which we make future decisions, not eternal but one we tentatively are committed to. The process of decision fixes the weights reasons are to have. The situation resembles that of precedents within a legal system; an earlier decision is not simply ignored, though it may be overturned for reason.⁴³

Such a volitional approach cannot be accounted for adequately by a regularity theory of causation, but it is not irrational or intelligible because it affords teleological personal explanation. Human actions are not the result of previously determined events nor of random indeterminate accidents, but of willful determination. The voluntaristic account, of course, squares well with the

⁴³ Nozick, 103.

compelling phenomenological and introspective evidence of our own experience.

This brief outline of a theory of action leaves much unsaid, and many objections could be raised against it. But other action theories face similar difficulties, particularly in dealing with phenomena such as weakness of will (*akrasia*). Those who insist that humans always act on *all-things-considered judgments* (Plato originally outlined this rationality account; more recent versions are proposed by Donald Davidson,⁴⁴ Michael Bratman,⁴⁵ and Graeme Marshall⁴⁶ Davidson) have a mistaken anthropology that humans always do the right thing. Other prescriptivists substitute the *greatest desire* for the best judgment as the strongest motivation for action (R. M. Hare⁴⁷, David Wiggins,⁴⁸ David

⁴⁴ Donald Davidson, "How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?" in *Moral Concepts*, ed. Joel Feinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 93-113, reprinted in Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 21-42; see also "Actions, Reasons and Causes," 3-19; and "Intending," 83-102; in the same volume; and "Paradoxes of Irrationality," in *Philosophical Essays on Freud*, ed. R. Wollheim and J. Hopkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 289-305.

⁴⁵ Michael Bratman, "Practical Reasoning and Weakness of the Will," *Nous* 13 (1979), 153-171.

⁴⁶ Graeme Marshall, "Action on the Rationality Principle," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 59 (1981), 54-67.

⁴⁷ R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 67-85; *Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method, and Point* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981).

⁴⁸ David Wiggins, "Weakness of Will, Commensurability, and the Objects of Deliberation and Desire," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. A.D. Rorty (London: University of California Press, 1980), 241-256.

Charles,⁴⁹ Gary Watson,⁵⁰ David Pears,⁵¹ and Stephen Schiffer⁵²). In this approach, a rebellious desire “takes over” the will in an act of executive irrationality. This approach does not do justice to human rationality and the human ability to transcend our mere desires. The most glaring absence in both the classical all-things-considered rationalist account and the greatest desire account is the *agent*. Who chooses the greatest good or strongest desire, and who effects the intention to fulfill them? Obviously, neither a belief nor a desire could perform either of these functions. A desire is simply not a choice, and to confuse these is a significant category mistake. Without being pedantic, the following simple logical argument/distinction would appear to preclude making desire, belief, or an all-things-considered judgment the determinant of deliberate action:

- (a) Deliberate personal choice from among alternatives is a necessary causal ground for human action.
- (b) A desire, belief, or all-things-considered judgment is not a choice, but is a possible object of choice.
- (c) Therefore, deliberate action does not result from mere desires, beliefs, or all-things-considered judgments, but requires a choice.

Desires and judgments may be important antecedent conditions of action, but they alone do not cause action. Choice can bring about an action apart from a desire, belief, or all-things-considered judgment, but neither desire, belief, nor an all-things considered judgment (nor the sum of them all) can bring

⁴⁹ David Charles, “Rationality and Irrationality,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 83 (1983), 191-212.

⁵⁰ Gary Watson, “Free Agency,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1975), 205-220, reprinted in *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 96-110; and “Skepticism about Weakness of Will,” *Philosophical Review* 86 (1977), 316-339.

⁵¹ David Pears, *Motivated Irrationality* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).

⁵² Stephen Schiffer, “A Paradox of Desire,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13 (1976), 159-203.

about an action without a choice. Hugh McCann warns against the reductionism of causally deterministic accounts of action that

do not allow for independent mental states of intending, but rather seek to reduce intention to other states, often a combination of desire and belief which, when they cause behavior of an appropriate kind, are held to issue in an intentional action. . . . Intentions do frequently accord with strongest desires, and they frequently accord with judgments of what is best. The problem is, however, that strongest desire and best judgment may be out of accord with each other, and then intention can go either way.⁵³

An action theory which takes seriously the role of volition in intention formation is, then, at least as tenable as other action theories. Molding a well-considered volitional action theory with his agency theory of causation would put Chisholm's account on even firmer footing.

Toward a Biblical View of Agent Causation

In a Christian perspective of agent causation, persons/agents are seen as personal beings created in the image of God, who is the sovereignly free First Cause and Unmoved Mover. It pleased God to endow humans as His image bearers with a reflection of His sovereign freedom. Because we are created beings, we can never exercise sovereign freedom (or to create *ex nihilo*); we can only exercise a creaturely freedom within the alternatives presented to us within this created world.

The following propositions outline this perspective of agent causation and creaturely freedom:

AC¹ – God is the First Cause/Prime Mover of all things in the universe.

AC² – As an exercise of His sovereign freedom, God created the world and maintains it through His providential care.

AC³ – God sovereignly chose to structure the material world in an orderly way such that it operates and may be understood (within the space-time continuum) through such

⁵³ McCann, "Intrinsic Intentionality," 247, 252.

natural patterns as those predicted by the Universal Law of Causation and the Principle of Sufficient Reason.

AC⁴ – God also sovereignly chose to create humans in His image, including a creaturely freedom that reflects to some degree His sovereign freedom.

AC⁵ – Within the universe, God is the ultimate cause of all events and the proximate/direct cause of some events.

AC⁶ – God sovereignly chose to so structure the world that the laws of nature and the choices of free agents are allowed to be the proximate/direct causes of many events.

AC⁷ – Therefore, God sovereignly chose to structure the universe such that the free choices of human agents can rise above the natural chain of causation and initiate/cause acts which otherwise would not have happened.

This account of creaturely freedom and agent causation squares well with the consistent theme in Scripture that humans are held accountable to fulfill God’s moral imperatives. This theme of human accountability to meet divine moral imperatives is evident in the various genre of Scripture—in the divine imperatives of the Ten Commandments and the apodictic law, in the moral teaching of the wisdom literature, in the moral imperatives of the prophets, in the commands of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and His other teaching on ethics, and on the extensive moral teaching of the Apostle Paul. Each of these literally hundreds of moral imperatives in Scripture would be a silly exercise if humans were not able to choose good over evil. Scripture holds persons morally accountable for their actions.

In addition to moral accountability, Scripture records classic calls to decision such as “Choose life that you might live,” (Deut. 30:19); “Choose you this day whom you will serve,” (Josh. 24:15); “Seek God that you may live,” (Amos 5:6); and “Seek good and not evil that you may live” (Amos 5:14). These invitations to decision continue in the New Testament. When those who felt pricked in their heart after the Pentecost sermon approached Peter about what they should do, he responded, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). Paul famously replied to the desperate Philippian jailer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and

you shall be saved, and your house” (Acts 16:31). Even the determination of human leadership in the church appeared to involve human choice in attempted alignment with God’s will: “Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch” (Acts 15:22). It seems odd to call people to make a choice if no real choice were possible.

Agent causation is also consistent with the emphasis on a time of decision and invitation in evangelicalism and revivalism. It also accords with John’s self-description of why he went to seminary, and indeed it squares with the common intuition about action theory which arises from our introspection of our own actions. Given all this vast sea of witnesses, perhaps agent causation in concert with a creaturely soft libertarian view of freedom are worth serious consideration.