

Chisholm's agent-causal theory

PHIL 43503
Jeff Speaks

March 31, 2009

1 A dilemma about free will

We are familiar with arguments for the incompatibility of determinism and free will. Chisholm adds an argument for the incompatibility of indeterminism and free will (27-8).

His argument is basically this: if an action is uncaused, then it is random, and hence cannot be free.

This argument is plausible enough as far as it goes, but it is an argument against the conjunction of free will with indeterminism only if we assume that there can be no such thing as indeterministic causation. Chisholm here seems to be assuming that indeterministic event causation makes no sense.

However, we have already seen a way in which this hole in Chisholm's argument might be filled: by the sort of case against "causal indeterminism" sketched in O'Connor's article.

Let's suppose this argument is convincing. Then we seem to have an argument that ϕ being free is inconsistent with: (i) its being deterministically event-caused, (ii) its being indeterministically event-caused, and (iii) its being uncaused.

It follows that if free will exists, then it must involve some sort of causation other than event causation. This is Chisholm's view.

2 Transeunt vs. immanent causation

Chisholm's response to this dilemma is to say that sometimes actions are not caused by events, but by substances – in this case, people. This is what he calls *immanent causation*. In cases of free action, the action is caused by a brain event which is immanently caused by the agent of the action.

This sort of view, as Chisholm notes, is open to a few objections.

1. How can I cause events in my brain to happen if I have no idea what those events are?

2. What do I add to the claim that a certain brain event happened when I say that this event was agent-caused? What is the difference between that event just happening and its having been agent-caused?

Chisholm replies that the same unanswerable question can be raised with respect to event causation; but it seems that there are answers to this question in the case of event (transeunt) causation which are not available in the case of agent causation.

3. Consider this event: Bob agent-causing a certain brain event. Is this event agent caused, or not? If not, it seems that it is uncaused, and hence random. But if it is agent-caused, consider this event: Bob agent-causing his own agent-causing of a certain brain event. Is this event agent-caused, or not?
4. If this theory is true, then there can be no 'science of man,' since free actions would not be covered under any laws.
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