This is a preprint of a paper published in *Human Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 389-393, 2022. Please use the published version here for citation.

CAUSATION WITHOUT THE CAUSAL THEORY OF ACTION

ELENA POPA

Abstract

This paper takes a critical stance on Tallis's separation of causation and agency. While his critique of the causal theory of action and the assumptions about causation underlying different versions of determinism, including the one based on neuroscience is right, his rejection of causation (of all sorts) has implausible consequences. Denying the link between action and causation amounts to overlooking the role action plays in causal inference and in the origin of causal concepts. I suggest that a weaker version of Tallis' claim, compatible with causation understood as agency, would work better.

Keywords: causation; agency; causal inference; causal concepts

1. Introduction

In chapter 5 of *Freedom: An Impossible Reality*, Raymond Tallis expands his critique of the causal theory of action to rejecting the link between agency and causation. Also known as the standard theory of action, the causal theory has dominated the philosophy of action during the 20th century, and is closely connected to debates over mental causation and physicalism (see D'Oro and Sandis 2013). Building upon groundwork set by Anscombe (1957) and Davidson (1963), the causal theory holds that "the agent performs an action only if an appropriate internal state of the agent causes a particular result in a certain way" (Davis 2010, p. 32). This raises an important philosophical question: if one's intentional actions are caused, is free will possible? It is this particular problem that Tallis is concerned with, and his rejection of the causal theory of action is done against the broader backdrop of a distinction separating "actions – what people do – from nature conceived of as a nexus of law-governed causes of what merely happens in the physical world" (Tallis 2021, p. 152). A consequence of this approach is that a sharp boundary is drawn between action and causation, with a rejection of the notion of agent causation. This paper is in agreement with Tallis' critique of the causal theory of action, but argues that rejecting the connection between agency and causation has implausible consequences, namely giving up the epistemic benefits of learning about causal connections through action. This shortcoming is partly due to Tallis's framing of causation

almost exclusively in physicalist terms, according to the Humean account of succession. Freedom, which Tallis defends, plays a central role in both the origin of causal concepts and in inferring causally about instances that go beyond the model of billiard balls. This view can be traced to work by Collingwood (1937-1938; 1940) and von Wright (1974; 1976), who defended their own versions of action-based accounts of causation, with von Wright also being a notable critic of the causal theory of action. In the following, I will briefly explore Tallis's critical remarks regarding causation and his rejection of the connection between action and causation. I will then explain how a weaker claim is tenable, rejecting the causal theory of action but keeping a notion of causation as agency, while noting points of compatibility with agency theories of causation.

2. Causation and action

Tallis's discussion in chapter 5 contains both a critique of causal theories of action and of agent causation. Regarding the former, he holds that causal theories of action overlook a central feature of action: "the *possibilities* that agents aim to actualize and the co-presence of past, present, and future which lies at their heart" (Tallis 2021, p. 153). Unpacking this, action requires a temporal frame, in which the agent identifies a certain point in time as 'now'. Then what Tallis deems as possibility is the open character of the future, in contrast with the past being closed. An agent pursuing a goal situates themselves in time, and acts such as to bring about the goal in the future. Tallis proceeds to a critique of the agent causation account of free will, concluding that "it is best to lay aside the idea of causation completely" (Tallis 2021, p. 149). Among his points against it are the lack of explanatory power, and the potential collapse into Davidson's causal theory of action. An exception is the employment of agent causation for the purposes of blame and responsibility ascriptions, which Tallis acknowledges, while denying its uses in other cases (Tallis 2021, p. 135; 241). My aim here is not to engage with these arguments as such, but rather to trace assumptions with regards to causation present in Tallis view, and to explore implausible consequences.

Firstly, the notion of causation Tallis appears to assume is something along the lines of Humean regularity: observing repeated instances of one event being followed by another leads one to make a generalization about the former event causing the latter (see Hume 1748). This understanding of causation leads Tallis to the conclusion that the causal theory of action construes agents as mere spectators, whereas on his account agency presupposes that they have control over the means to bring about their goals. Yet, there are approaches to causation that have challenged the spectator view, and they support a different conception of causation without endorsing the causal theory of action. Perhaps the earliest statement regarding the link between action and causal concepts is by Collingwood: "for a mere spectator there are no causes" (Collingwood 1940, p. 307).

More recently, Menzies and Price have contested the Humean view: “the notion of causation thus arises not, as Hume has it, from our experience of mere *succession*; but rather from our experience of *success*” (Menzies and Price 1993, p. 194). I rely mainly on Collingwood’s views as illustration, while noting that similar points apply to other agency approaches to causation. Collingwood subsumes causal thought under a presupposition connecting the efficient cause (*causa quod*) to the final cause (*causa ut*): the former is an existing state of affairs, while the latter is a desired the state of affairs (Collingwood 1940, p. 292). Under this assumption, Collingwood distinguishes between types of causal explanation:

- Sense I: between a motivation or intention and an action.
- Sense II: between an action and an event in nature.
- Sense III: between events in nature (Collingwood 1940, p. 285).

Collingwood further holds that Sense I is logically prior to the other two, which are modeled on it. There is also continuity between all three senses.[1] How to get from Sense I to a sense of causation that does not involve action has been a problem for agency approaches to causation, which I will not discuss here.[2] Interestingly, Tallis’s criticism of the causal theory of action goes against a picture where something akin to Sense III is taken to be logically prior to Sense I: causal instances as witnessed in nature are taken to operate at the level of reasons to act. By contrast, on Collingwood’s view causal thought goes from acting to achieve a goal, to observing causal patterns between events in nature. As I will argue below, this view of Collingwood’s is not incompatible with some of Tallis’s considerations, and can also be used to question assumptions originating in Hume’s views.

Secondly, Tallis is right to point out that the Humean notion of causation, which underlies the causal theory of action and subsequent attacks on free will, is also present in contemporary deterministic views drawing on work in neuroscience. Bringing the philosophical background into question is important, as other critiques of determinism point out that neuroscience on its own cannot make a conclusive claim in this sense: “modern neuroscience is not, in fact, establishing what amounts to a wholesale fundamentalism with respect to determinism” (Gazzaniga 2012, p. 6). Critiques of free will from the perspective of neuroscience inherit the regularity concept of causation originating in Hume, which was employed by logical empiricism and further propagated throughout 20th century philosophy. Still, it is worth noting that this assumption was also subject to criticism. Von Wright (1971; 1974) brought forward an approach to causation for the natural sciences meant to overcome Hempel’s (1965) model, which relied on a Humean notion of causation. While von Wright did not connect agency and causation at an ontological level, his

1 See Popa (2016) for discussion.
2 See Illari & Russo (2014: ch. 17) for a review of action theories of causation, including shortcomings.

considerations on causal explanation, and particularly how free action from outside a system of variables can help establish causal connections in controlled experiments, is certainly relevant.[3] Free action is necessary for changing states within a system and determining which state is connected to which. This has a bearing on many areas of natural science, and it goes beyond observing regularities: people learn about causal connections by acting, and not only by observing. The distinction between causal instances within a system and those induced by a free agent is essential for the setup of controlled experiments. It should also be noted that von Wright is a critic of the causal theory of action, and this is compatible with some of Tallis's main views: for von Wright, human actions are the result of a practical syllogism, where the premises logically entail the action (see Schumann 2017). As the connection is logical, and not causal, von Wright concludes that causal explanations do not apply to human action. Thus, while rejecting the causal theory of action, von Wright attributes a role to action in providing causal explanations.

So far, I have illustrated how it is possible to use agency to infer causal relations, while also rejecting claims central to the causal theory of action. Agency theories of causation go one step further, and define causation through agency. This, again, is not inconsistent with the critique of the causal theory: if agency is a more fundamental concept that can be used to define causation, agency itself cannot be defined in causal terms without circularity. There are agency theories claiming that both causation and temporal direction are secondary qualities, i.e., involving the projection of human abilities onto the structure of the world (e.g., Price 2007). Tallis gets close to this when claiming that: 'We project into nature at large our ability to shape things and consequently see natural events as having a quasi-agentive power' (Tallis 2021, p. 149).

My proposal, thus, is that Tallis's view be weakened, such that the criticism of the causal theory of action and its implications for free will still stands, but agency and causation still come together. This is a legitimate possibility as shown by the analysis of the views discussed above. The advantage of this weaker claim is that it can capture the complex nature of causation, going beyond mere regularity, and acknowledge the role of action in acquiring causal knowledge. Furthermore, this view would also help answer a question that Tallis leaves unanswered: why is it that causation and action can come together in the case of attributions of responsibility, and not in other cases? Multiple possible functions of causal concepts have been pointed out in the literature, responsibility being among them (Godfrey-Smith 2010), but also manipulation and control (Woodward 2013). Denying the link between causation and agency would place too exclusive a focus on responsibility and blame, thereby downplaying the richness of causal thought.

3 See Popa (2017: section 2) for discussion.

References

Anscombe, G. E. M. (1957). *Intention*. Basil Blackwell.

Collingwood, R.G. (1937–38). On the So-Called Idea of Causation. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 38: 85–112

Collingwood, R. G. (1940). *An essay on metaphysics*. Oxford University Press. 2001.

Davidson, D. (1963). Actions, reasons, and causes. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 60(23), 685–700.

Davis, W. A. (2010). The causal theory of action. *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action*, 32-39.

D'Oro, G., & Sandis, C. (2013). From anti-causalism to causalism and back: A century of the reasons/causes debate. *Reasons and Causes: Causalism and Non-causalism in the Philosophy of Action*, 1–47.

Gazzaniga, M. (2012). *Who's in Charge?: Free Will and the Science of the Brain*. Hachette UK.

Godfrey-Smith, P. (2009). Causal pluralism. *The Oxford handbook of causation*, 326-337.

Hume, D. (1748). *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Charles River Editors. 2018.

Illari, P., & Russo, F. (2014). *Causality: Philosophical theory meets scientific practice*. OUP Oxford.

Menzies, P., & Price, H. (1993). Causation as a secondary quality. *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, *44*(2), 187-203.

Popa, E. (2016). Collingwood and Manipulability-based Approaches to Causation: Methodological Issues. *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, *22*(1), 139-166.

Popa, E. (2017). Causality, Human Action and Experimentation: Von Wright's Approach to Causation in Contemporary Perspective. *Acta Philosophica Fennica, 93*.

Price, H. (2007). Causal Perspectivalism. *Causation, Physics, and the Constitution of Reality: Russell's Republic Revisited*, 250–292. Oxford University Press.

Schumann, G. (2017). Von Wright's theory of action and the "Logical Connection Argument". On the Human Condition. In *Philosophical Essays in Honour of the Centennial Anniversary of Georg Henrik von Wright* (pp.325-338). The Philosophical Society of Finland, URL = <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303408636_Von_Wright%27s_theory_of_action_and_the_Logical_Connection_Argument>

Tallis, R. (2021). *Freedom: An Impossible Reality*. Agenda Publishing.

Von Wright, G. H. (1971). *Explanation and understanding*. Cornell University Press.

Von Wright, G. H. (1974). Causality and determinism. In *Causality and Determinism*. Columbia University Press.

Woodward, J. (2014). A functional account of causation; or, a defense of the legitimacy of causal thinking by reference to the only standard that matters—Usefulness (as opposed to metaphysics or agreement with intuitive judgment). *Philosophy of Science*, *81*(5), 691-713.

Department of Humanities and Languages
FLAME University
Pune, Maharashtra
India
elena.popa@flame.edu.in