HOW DOES AGENT-CAUSAL POWER WORK?

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Abstract: Agent-causalism or the agency theory is the thesis that agents qua objects/substances cause at least some of their decisions (or at least their coming to have an intention that is constitutive of a decision). In this paper, I examine the tenability of an attractive agent-causal account of the metaphysics of the springs of free action developed and defended in the recent work of Timothy O'Connor. Against the backdrop of recent work on causal powers in ontology, I argue that, however attractive the account, O'Connor's agent-causal theory of free agency is ultimately untenable.

1 INTRODUCTION

Research on the nature of dispositionality or causal power has flourished in recent years in metaphysics. This trend has slowly begun to influence debates in the philosophy of agency, especially in the literature on free will. Both sophisticated versions of agent-causalism and the new varieties of dispositionalist compatibilism exploit recently developed accounts of dispositionality in their defense.[1] In this paper, I examine recent work on agent-causal power, focusing primarily on the account of agent-causalism developed and defended by Timothy O'Connor's in his work on free will.[2] Assuming the existence of irreducible causal powers, I offer an argument for the ontological reducibility of agent-causation.[3] I argue that given certain ontological assumptions about the

[1] For agent-causal theories, see Alvarez and Hyman (1998), Brent (2012), Mayr (2011), O'Connor (2000, 2009a, 2009b). For dispositionalist compatibilist theories, see Fara (2008), Smith (1997, 2003), and Vihvelin (2004). Clarke (2009), Cohen and Handfield (2007), and Whittle (2010) offer critiques of dispositionalist compatibilist theories. And for critique of agent-causal strategies, see Clarke (2003).

[2] I focus on O'Connor's work in part because his views are well developed and informed by recent work on the ontology of causal powers. Mayr (2011) exhibits the same sort of ontological seriousness we find in O'Connor's publications. But O'Connor's work has the advantage of having developed as the result of an ongoing dialectic between O'Connor and his critics. The disadvantage of focusing on O'Connor's work is that he is only interested in defending an agent-causal theory of libertarian *free* agency. Other recent defenses of agent-causalism, such as Alvarez and Hyman (1998), Brent (2012), and Mayr (2011) are offered in support of agent-causal theories of action. Still, a critique of O'Connor's work has implications for other similar defenses of the metaphysics of agency more generally.

[3] I agree, however, with John Bishop (1989) that agent-causation is conceptually irreducible. (Like me, Bishop argues that agent-causation is ontologically reducible, but for reasons different from those offered in this paper.) So my goal here, like Bishop's, is not to offer a conceptual or linguistic analysis of 'agent-causation.' Rather, I wish to examine what agent-causation *is*.

The Modern Schoolman, *Vol. 88, No. 1–2, January and April 2011, pp. 105–121*

nature of agents *qua* objects and their dispositional properties, agent-causalism is untenable. By 'agent-causalism' I wish to designate the doctrine that agent-causation is ontologically irreducible. Further, the agent-causal relation is understood as a productive relation between an agent *qua* substance and some action or an intention to act.

I proceed as follows in this paper. In section two, I sketch the basic ontological commitments of agent-causalism, and offer an account of the causal role of powers. I then spend the bulk of the remainder of the section clarifying and examining what appears at first glance to be a promising account of agent-causal power and its role in the etiology of free agency offered by Timothy O'Connor that distinguishes agent-causalism from other theories in the metaphysics of free agency. In section three, I offer an argument against the version of agent-causalism O'Connor defends. Finally, in section four, I respond to two possible replies that agent-causalists may offer to my argument.

2 AGENTS AND AGENT-CAUSAL POWER

An easy way to critique agent-causalism would be to simply articulate a set of fundamental ontological commitments from which the falsity of agent-causalism would naturally follow. Such an approach involves first offering up a theory of action and agency that is at odds with agent-causalism and then determining the basic ontological commitments of that theory. Where one's favored theory is at odds with agent-causalism, one could easily account for why agent-causalism is untenable. Agent-causalism would not only conflict with one's own action theoretic commitments, but also the ontological commitments of one's theory of action. This would allow one to specify where agent-causalism goes wrong without having to explicitly mention how it conflicts with one's action theoretic commitments.

The aforementioned approach would have all of the advantages of theft over honest toil. And, as is often the case with theft, the thief may pay another price. Theft may give the critic of agent-causalism what she wants, but it would come at the cost of circumventing deeper ontological debates that have significant implications for our theories of action and agency. Moreover, such a maneuver amounts to simply removing oneself from important aspects of the existing dialectic altogether. Specifically, it allows one to get an ontological framework for theorizing about agency on the cheap, so to speak. More specifically, such an approach betrays a lack of ontological seriousness, a quality too rarely displayed in recent debates in the philosophy of agency.

I will assume that being *ontologically serious* in the philosophy of agency requires that we give an account and defense of the alleged truth-makers for our theories of action and agency that constitute the ontological commitments of our theories.[4] Where those basic ontological commitments are untenable, it may

[4] I am here assuming the inadequacy of the Quinean criterion (according to which "To be is to be the value of a variable") for determining the ontological commitments of our theories (including folk theories) (Quine 1948/1997, 85). Rather, for reasons I cannot explore here, I find Ross

require a change in our higher-order theories, such as our theories of action and agency. Of course, this is a risky project for those (including myself) who have staked out a position in any number of debates in the philosophy of agency. But it strikes me as a more promising way to perhaps gain some traction in what often seem like intractable debates over free agency and hopefully enjoy some progress in our theorizing.

Given the liabilities of the putative easy path of theft, I will proceed in a manner that will, admittedly, make my task more difficult. But the end result should, I hope, be more satisfying. I will first sketch the broad basic ontological commitments of agent-causalism and offer an account of the causally productive role of the powers of objects. Next, I will attempt to flesh out the account of agent-causal power and its role in the etiology of free agency offered by Timothy O'Connor.

2.1 BROAD ONTOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Agent-causalism assumes at least a two-category ontology. Minimally, the basic ontological categories are objects (substances) and properties. I only wish to assert that a two-category ontology is *necessary* for agent-causalism. I remain silent as to whether a two-category ontology is *sufficient* to provide the grounds for agent-causalism. Agent-causalists may debate over whether other basic categories are necessary. I ignore any such debate in this paper.

While there can be an open debate among agent-causalists over whether there are more than two basic ontological categories, it should be evident to those familiar with the debates over agent-causalism that a one-category ontology is not a viable option for an agent-causalist. In fact, if a one-category ontology is the most we can hope for in the foundation of our metaphysics of agency, then agent-causalism will be untenable. Given the emphasis on the powers of agents, as will become apparent, the agent-causalist cannot dispense with properties from among the basic ontological commitments of her theory. And what makes agent-causalism as an ontological thesis distinctive among other accounts of the metaphysics of agency is that the agent-causalist holds that agents understood as objects directly cause their own intentions when they make free decisions if not all of their intentional actions. So, if I am right, then agent-causalists must reject both a thoroughgoing nominalism about properties and they must reject bundle-theoretic accounts of objects. In the remainder of this sub-section, I say a little about objects and properties before I move on to consider the nature of agent-causal power, a central feature of the ontological framework necessary for agent-causalism.[5]

First, regarding objects, beyond rejecting bundle-theoretic accounts of objects, the exact nature of objects is not something I think I need to worry

Cameron's (2008) truth-making criterion more promising. According to Cameron, "the ontological commitments of a theory are just those things that must exist to make true the sentences of that theory" (2008, 4).

[5] I suspect that some of what I say may be objectionable to *some* agent-causalists. But many would agree with the basic picture I sketch.

about for my purposes in this paper. What is important is the following. Agents are objects. Objects are substances, where by 'substances' I am designating the basic entities that are the *bearers* of properties (Heil 2003, 171). Agents *qua* objects are not bundles of properties. Agents *qua* objects *possess* properties.[6]

Regarding properties, I will assume that there are real properties. Moreover, I will assume that the most viable alternatives take properties to be immanent universals or they take properties to be tropes. I will remain neutral regarding whether or not properties should be understood in trope-theoretic terms or as immanent universals.[7] What is important for my purposes is that properties be understood as ways that individual objects are (they are modes of objects). Objects, then, are in a sense more basic since there are no properties without the objects that have them. And, most importantly for my purposes in this paper, I assume that at least some properties are dispositional, endowing objects with causal powers.[8] Any change in an object's dispositional properties results in a change in its causal powers (Heil 2003, 115). In fact, the dispositional properties of an object just are the causal powers of the object. So gaining or losing dispositional properties results in a net gain or net loss of an object's causal powers. If this is true of objects generally, then it is true of agents.

Regarding the manifestation of dispositional properties, individual causal powers are generally multi-track and directed at "endless manifestations with an infinity of present or absent, actual or nonactual alternative disposition partners" (Martin 2007, 29). C. B. Martin suggests thinking of the projectivity of an individual disposition as constituting a complex web, which he calls a "Power Net" (2007, 29). Consider the sphericity of a ball.[9] This property of the ball is capable of diverse manifestations depending upon the property with which it comes into contact that serves as a disposition partner. The ball will roll if it

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[6] I prefer the terms 'possess' and 'has/have' over 'instantiates' and 'exemplify.' The latter terms imply a view of properties as immanent universals. An object can possess a property whether or not properties are particulars (tropes) or universals. Another advantage of this terminology is that it allows us to distinguish between those properties an object possesses but are not manifested at a moment and those properties that are possessed and manifested. For instance, sodium chloride possesses the dispositional property of being dissolvable in water. It only manifests this property, however, when it comes into contact with water—i.e., when the dissolvability of the salt is paired with the water's disposition to dissolve salt. (For a defense, see Molnar 2003, chapter 4.)

[7] For a defense of properties as immanent/*in rebus* universals, see Armstrong (1978, 1989, 1997). Representative trope-theoretic accounts are offered in Campbell (1981, 1990), Heil (2003), Martin (2008), Molnar (2003), and Williams (1953). There are important differences between Campbell and Williams, on the one hand, and Heil, Martin, and Molnar. Specifically, Campbell and Williams assume a one-category ontology with objects being bundles of tropes. Heil, Martin, and Molnar include irreducible objects in their ontologies, with tropes as modes or ways objects are. Given the two-category ontology being assumed in this paper, if some version of trope-theory were to be assumed, it would be closer to the views endorsed by Heil, Martin, and Molnar.

[8] Echoing Alexander's Dictum/the Eleatic Principle, I would contend that all real properties are dispositional. Moreover, all properties are qualitative/categorical. They have, to use C. B. Martin's language, "a dual nature": "in virtue of possessing a property, an object possesses *both* a particular dispositionality *and* a particular qualitative character" (2007, 44). John Heil also defends this view, dubbing it "the identity theory" of properties (Heil 2003, chapter 11). On this point (and others), Molnar (2003) parts company with Heil and Martin. For additional defenses of versions of the identity theory, see Engelhard (2010), Jacobs (2011), and Mumford (1998).

[9] The following example is borrowed from Heil forthcoming.

comes into contact with a solid surface. It will leave a concave, reversible impression if it comes into contact with a surface with the appropriate elasticity. And so on. The same disposition is manifested in different ways with different partners.

I assume that the manifestation of a dispositional property should not be confused with the effect of its manifestation.[10] A framework for understanding how the manifestation of a causal power figures in the bringing about of an effect is provided by the dispositionalist theories of causation (DTC) proposed by John Heil (forthcoming) and C. B. Martin (2007).[11] The standard story of causation takes causation to be a diachronic relation between two events.[12] The events either merely involve an object possessing some property or properties at a time or involve some change in the properties possessed by an object at a time.[13] On the version of DTC assumed here, causation can be either diachronic or synchronic and involves a causing and an outcome of the causing. The causing is symmetrical and involves the mutual manifestation of dispositional properties that are manifestation partners. When the proper manifestation partners of an object or more than one object are paired, the powers of the object(s) are manifested and, as a result of the pairing, an outcome is produced which is the possession of some further property by an object. For every causing, there is an outcome, which is the effect of the causing (the causing being the cause). While the causing is symmetrical, the production of the outcome is asymmetrical. But the causing and the outcome can be either simultaneous or occur at different times. Consider a relatively simple case that is commonly discussed in the literature. Assume that sodium chloride has the dispositional property of being soluble and that H_2O has the dispositional property of dissolving sodium chloride. When these properties are paired when some salt comes into contact with water they mutually manifest their relevant dispositions. The outcome of the causing that occurs when the properties are paired is a liquid with the properties sufficient to make it brine. (If the sodium chloride is sterile, we get saline.)

2.2 AGENT-CAUSAL POWER AND THE METAPHYSICS OF AGENCY

What makes an agent an agent and not something else is a matter of the properties the agent possesses. On this point both proponents and critics of agent-causalism will agree. Also, we cannot simply derive agent-causalism from a neat application of the basic ontological commitments laid out in section 2.1. Agent-causalist theories and other theories of action and agency can share the same ontological commitments up to this point.[14] Moreover, a critic of agent-

[10] See Molnar (2003, 194–98).

[11] There are some slight differences between the two. However, their views are very close. Heil's position has the advantage of being more clearly articulated. The view I articulate here is heavily indebted to Heil's work. But there are some possible slight differences.

[12] See Davidson (1980b) for a presentation of the standard story of causation.

[13] See Kim (1976) for the classic statement of the first account and Lombard (1979, 1998) for the refinement involving changes.

[14] For instance, I share the agent-causalists commitments outlined in section 2.1, but I reject agent-causalism.

causalism may endorse many of the other commitments I have not mentioned that are claimed by some to be necessary for agent-causalism.[15] What makes agent-causalism distinctive is what its proponents say about the nature of agent-causal power and its exercise.

According to the agent-causalist, agent-causal power is "*inherently* goal directed." In this respect, it is like other causal powers.[16] What is unique is that, "It is the power of an agent to cause an intention in order to satisfy some desire or to achieve some aim" (O'Connor 2009a, 196). On this point, the contemporary agent-causalist echoes Thomas Reid:[17]

> The name of a *cause* and of an *agent,* is properly given to that being only, which, by its active power, produces some change in itself, or in some other being. The change, whether it be of thought, of will, or of motion, is the effect. Active power, therefore, is a quality in the cause, which enables it to produce the *effect*. And the exertion of that active power in producing the effect, is called *action, agency, efficiency* . . . . (Reid 1788/1969, 268)

Depending upon how we understand *inherent goal-directedness* in intentional agency and how Reid's claim about "a *cause* and of an *agent*" is parsed, critics of agent-causalism with varied action-theoretic commitments can agree with the agent-causalist.

For instance, consider the causal theory of action (CTA). According to the CTA, some behavior *A* is an action if and only if *A* is the nondeviantly produced causal outcome of the occurrence of some mental items (e.g., an intention or a belief-desire pair) that rationalize and contribute to explaining *A*.[18] The defender of the CTA can appropriate the causal framework provided by DTC and take the mental items to be the mental process that occurs in virtue of an object manifesting some appropriate dispositional mental properties with the outcome being an action. The properties may constitute the agent's motivating reasons (which are internal mental properties of agents) that may be acquired in

[15] An additional ontological commitment of agent-causalism that Timothy O'Connor mentions that sets agent-causalism apart is that it requires a rejection of four-dimensionalism about objects, especially agents. So agents *qua* objects are enduring three-dimensional objects. See O'Connor (2002, 341) for a defense of the claim that agents must be enduring three-dimensional objects and not perduring four-dimensional objects. Of course, while the critic of agent-causalism may not share the agent-causalists motivation for rejecting four-dimensionalism, this is not a distinctive commitment that is sufficient for one to count as an agent-causalist.

[16] For a defense of the intentionality or directedness of dispositions, see Molnar (2003, chapter 3). As will become apparent, defenders of the agent-causal view under consideration here should have no problem with the intentionality of dispositions given what agent-causal power is directed at.

[17] I recognize there is some controversy over whether Reid should be interpreted as an agent-causalist. Even if he is best understood as defending a form of agent-causalism similar to versions found today, there is further debate over his additional action-theoretic commitments. For recent exemplary defenses of understanding Reid as an agent-causalist, that differ with respect to how best to understand the details of Reid's agent-causalism, see Rowe (1991), O'Connor (1994), and Yaffe (2004).

[18] The *locus classicus* for the causal theory of action is Davidson (1963/1980). For seminal book-length defenses of versions of the causal theory of action, see Bishop (1989), Brand (1984), Enç (2003), Goldman (1970), and Mele (1992, 2003).

response to normative reasons (which may include external features of the agent's environment).[19] The proponent of the CTA can argue that agent-causal power is a derived power that depends upon the more basic dispositional properties possessed by agents that constitute their motivating reasons and their capacity to respond to such reasons.[20] These dispositional properties causally structure, produce, and sustain behavior aimed at particular goals (O'Connor 2009a, 196). Of course, the final story told by the proponent of CTA regarding the etiology of action is not what proponents of agent-causalism have in mind when they invoke agent-causal power. For one, the proponent of the dispositionalist CTA we are imagining will not allow for causation by objects *qua* objects. The CTA proponent who endorses DTC will insist that causal processes, including those involved in exercises of free agency, involve pairings of the causal powers of agents and the world with which they are interacting. Causation by objects *qua* objects is not part of this picture of agency. It is some of the modes or ways that an agent is at a time that are doing all of the causal work. So more is needed if we are to get clear on what is distinctive about an agent-causalist account of agent-causal power.

Perhaps the following is distinctive of the agent-causalist understanding of agent-causal power, especially if agent-causal power is a power manifested by agents when they exercise free agency. While it is inherently goal-directed, agent-causal power is not directed toward any *particular* end. Suppose that what agents directly produce when they manifest agent-causal power are intentions. Suppose further that the production of an intention by the agent is constitutive of the mental action of deciding and a decision is a momentary mental action of forming an intention whereby an agent resolves some practical uncertainty about whether to A or not-A.[21] If this is right, then perhaps agent-causal power is directed toward enabling an agent to make a decision to A or not-A (O'Connor 2009a, 195).[22] This suggests an additional often-mentioned feature of agent-causal power (at least for free actions). It confers dual-ability on an agent making a decision. At the time an agent freely decides, the agent has it in her power to decide otherwise.[23] The agent-causal power of an agent is among

[19] Henceforth, in referring to 'reasons' I should be understood as referring to motivating reasons that are constituted by some relevant dispositional properties of an agent aimed at a particular end. The distinction between motivating and normative reasons for action assumed here will not satisfy defenders of non-psychological theories of reasons for action, but it does disambiguate two senses of 'reason' that are germane for debates in the philosophy of action over reasons for action. Recent defenses of non-psychological theories of reasons include Alvarez (2010), Bittner (2001), Dancy (2000), Lowe (2008), Scanlon (1998), and Tanney (2005). See Mele (2003, 2007) for a general critique of this approach.

[20] For more on derivative powers, see Molnar (2003, 143–48).

[21] This is roughly the account of decision proposed and defended in Mele (2003, chapter 9). O'Connor seems to agree with the general features of such a characterization of deciding in his more recent work. Where he parts from Mele and others is that he seems to take deciding to be constituted by the agent's causing an intention (e.g., O'Connor 2009a, 195–96). That said, if deciding is a process that terminates in the acquisition of an intention, this makes very little difference for my purposes here. See McCall (1987) and McCall and Lowe (2005) for statements of process views of deciding.

[22] See also O'Connor (2000, 86; 2005, 217–19; 2009b, 119).

[23] This is not to say that the power to make a decision is the same thing as having dual ability. It may be the case that an agent with the power to decide lacks the power to actually decide differently than he finally does.

the grounds for the truth of any modal claims to the effect that it was metaphysically possible that at the time an agent decided, she could have decided differently than she actually did.

Again, this is not terribly unique. The libertarian about free agency who endorses the CTA and provides an account of free agency in terms of the CTA (the so-called event-causal libertarian) can agree with the agent-causalist about the lack of any particular end for agent-causal power and the dual-ability this engenders. On such a view, an agent can have an intention to make up his mind whether to *A* or not-*A* and this plays a role in the causal production of the deliberation that leads up to the final decision. When the agent deliberates, the agent's reasons for *A*-ing and not-*A*-ing compete for final causal influence. The final decision is indeterministically caused by the reasons that win out. If we were to rewind the event, given the exact same competing reasons, things could have turned out differently.[24] Agent-causal power on this sort of view is a derivative power that can be reduced to a collection of the agent's dispositional properties including the agent's power to be responsive to reasons. This power is then manifested when partnered with the agent's intention to make up his mind and the agent's reasons for action that compete for final causal influence.

Of course, the agent-causalist would insist that the foregoing is *not* an exercise of agent-causal power. The reductive account of agent-causal power defenders of the CTA, including so-called event-causal libertarians, endorse delivers an account of the etiology of actions (including free decisions) that emphasizes a way or ways that an agent *is* at a time as doing all of the causal work. But this shifts attention away from the agent *qua* agent who is enabled by a power as the cause. This is unacceptable to the agent-causalist. It is not any way the agent is, be it the agent's occurrent desire to *A* at *t* or, for that matter, to use O'Connor's example, "the agent's existing at *t*" that causes the intention to *A*. It is the agent himself *qua* substance that causes the agent's intention to *A* (O'Connor 2009a, 197).[25] And the agent is "never identical with [what] . . . is usually proposed as the 'real cause' of [the agent's] act, such as some intention or state of willing" (Taylor 1966, 111).

What about the causal influence of an agent's dispositional properties that are constitutive of her reasons for action?[26] The agent-causalist will not want to

[24] This is not intended to be an accurate summary of the account of the etiology of free agency defended by any particular event-causal libertarian. Rather, it is intended to be a generic characterization of how an event-causal libertarian may account for agent-causal power. It is neutral between varieties of event-causal libertarianism that locate indeterminism only in the deliberation that precedes a decision and accounts that locate indeterminism in the decision itself. The seminal defense of event-causal libertarianism is Kane (1996). Kane even describes his view as agent-causal, although the deeper metaphysical story about the etiology of free decisions is one involving mental items of the agent and not the agent as a substance *holus bolus*. See also Mele (1995, 2006), and Ekstrom (2000).

[25] See also Chisholm (1966, 12–13 and 17).

[26] For a challenge to agent-causalism based on the role assigned to reasons for action, see Thalberg (1978). Thalberg writes about agent-causalists that, "Speaking generally, I see a dilemma for them about the relationship between our bodily movement when we act—perhaps freely—and our motivational state. Either we have reasons or we do not. If we have none, our behavior will indeed be 'capricious.' The alleged fact that our movement comes about through agent-causation makes it no

allow for the occurrence of a reason for action to be even partially constitutive of an agent's exercise of agent-power, playing a role in the causal production or triggering of an agent's causing an intention. To do so would be to concede too much to proponents of reductive account of agent-causation. So what role do reasons play in the etiology of action?

O'Connor has taken this challenge to the agent-causalist seriously, and has recently suggested that a reason may be causally relevant, acting as a structuring-cause, appropriately "*structuring the agent causal capacity*" to cause an intention (2005, 216; see also 2009a, 197; 2009b, 120). On this view, reasons for action appear to be merely *causally relevant* to an agent's making a decision without being *causally efficacious* (Steward 1997, 186–190). Following Helen Steward, we can understand causal relevance in terms of the truth of counterfactuals. So an agent *S*'s reasons *R* are causally relevant to how an agent decides *D* only if *D* would not have occurred, or would have been less likely to occur, had *S* not had *R* (Steward 1997, 13–14). It is something close to Steward's conception of mere causal relevance that O'Connor seems to have in mind with respect to his account of reasons for action and other influences that structure agent-causal power:

> Expressed differently, agent causal power is a *structured* propensity towards a class of effects (the formings of executive intentions), such that at any given time, for each causally possible, specific agent-causal event-type, there is a definite objective probability of its occurrence within the range (0, 1), and this probability varies continuously as the agent is impacted by internal and external influences. (O'Connor 2009b, 120)

So reasons for action are among the influences that causally structure and, hence, constrain the exercise of agent-causal power. Thus, they do not, along with the agent *qua* substance at the time, causally *produce* an intention.[27] And the explanatory role of a *particular* reason for action invoked in a final explanation of why an agent decided to *A* is teleological. That the agent decided to *A* for this reason is because deciding to *A* promotes a goal that is the intentional object *G* of a desire or prior intention and figures in the content of an agent's intention that is caused by the agent when making the decision, e.g., "I will *A* for the sake of *G*" (O'Connor 2009b, 121–22).

We are now in a better position to see what is distinctive about agent-causal power according to at least one recent version of agent-causalism (*viz*., the

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less freakish. But if we act for reasons, how can these constitute anything other than a sufficient causal condition, or part of one, for the movement of our body which fulfills our action plan?" (1978, 564). O'Connor's solution to the problem of the role of reasons in the etiology and explanation of actions seems to get past the first horn of the dilemma. But he may still be stuck on the second horn given the role of reasons in his account as structuring causes. For a critique of an earlier version of O'Connor's account of reasons and their explanatory role in the etiology of free agency (in O'Connor 2000), see Feldman and Buckareff (2003).

[27] Hence, this is not like the position defended in Clarke (1993) that combines agent-causalism with reasons as causally producing action.

account developed by Timothy O'Connor). Agent-causal power is a *sui generis* type of causal propensity internal to an agent that is structured by reasons for action and other internal and external influences aimed at *enabling* the agent *qua* substance to causally produce a class of effects of a specified type (coming to have an intention) internal to the agent.[28] This distinguishes agent-causalism from other accounts of the metaphysics of agency.

3 *CONTRA* AGENT-CAUSALISM

In this section I consider the implications of the ontological assumptions of the previous section and the account of agent-causal power articulated for the debate over agent-causalism. Agent-causalists about free agency claim that agents *qua* objects that manifest agent-causal power directly cause intentions when they freely decide to *A*. Agent-causal power *enables* agents to directly cause their intentions. This then raises a question. Supposing that the controversy is over the causal production of an agent's intention to *A,* is it really the agent *qua* object that causally produces the agent's intention to *A* or is it the manifestation of some dispositional properties of the agent (including the structured propensity to act that is identified with agent-causal power) that causally produces the agent's intention to *A*?[29]

In this section, I will argue that the correct answer to the question in the previous paragraph is that it is the manifestation of some dispositional properties of the agent that produces the agent's intention to *A* as an outcome. Recalling the basic ontological framework of the previous section, consider the following simple argument.

(1) For any agent *S*, any intention *I* of *S* caused by *S*, and time *t*, *S* is able to cause *I* at *t* in virtue of having certain relevant dispositional properties.[30]
(2) If (1), then *S*'s acquiring *I* at *t* is the outcome of the mutual manifestation of paired dispositional properties of *S* at *t*.
(3) Therefore, *S*'s having *I* at *t* is the outcome of the mutual manifestation of paired dispositional properties of *S* at *t*.

Premise (1) is an assumption that I am sharing with the agent-causalist and should not be terribly controversial given the basic ontological framework provided in section 2 of this paper. But the agent-causalist will not accept premise (2). Ergo, it is in need of defense.

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[28] This is based on a summary of the account found in O'Connor (2009a, 2009b).
[29] I frame the question in terms of causal production because the agent-causalist such as O'Connor and his interlocutor can agree that the manifestation of some properties (specifically those that are manifested when it is true that an agent has some reason for acting) are structuring causes (causally relevant but not causally efficacious). But the debate is over whether the causing actually causally produces the decision.
[30] The formulation of this premise reflects suggestions made by Timothy O'Connor in his comments on my paper at the Second Conference on Responsibility, Agency, and Persons in 2011 as well as the recommendations of Jonathan Jacobs in his comments on my paper at the Pacific Division Meeting of the APA in 2012.

The ontological framework provided in the previous section of this paper should provide the tools necessary for justifying premise (2). I asserted there that objects' causal powers are identical with the dispositional properties they possess. And agent-causal power is identical with a particular dispositional property possessed by an agent, *viz*., the structured propensity to act. Assuming that dispositional mental properties are constitutive of an agent's motivating reasons for action, given the DTC account of causation and the nature of agent-causal power articulated above, then an agent's coming to possess an intention to *A* or coming to possess an intention not to *A* is the outcome of a causing involving the mutual manifestation of both the agent's motivating reasons and agent-causal power.[31] If this is right, then it looks like it is the manifestation of the relevant dispositional properties of the agent (i.e., the causing) that produces the agent's intention (the outcome). So agent-causation is not substance causation. Dispositional properties are doing all of the work. They do not merely enable the agent to cause an intention. The way the agent causes an intention is via the causal work of her relevant causal powers at a time.

The agent-causalist who endorses a view like O'Connor's will most likely not be convinced. The problem the agent-causalist faces can be put in terms of an exclusion problem. Consider the following slight modification of a well-known causal exclusion principle (Kim 2005, 17):

> ***Principle of causal exclusion.*** If *e* is causally produced by *c* at *t*, nothing at *t* distinct from *c* can causally produce *e* (unless this is a genuine case of causal overdetermination).[32]

For *reductio*, assume that the agent-causalist is right: agent-causation is substance causation. If this is correct, then the agent *qua* substance should be able to causally produce *holus bolus* the agent's intention to *A* without the causal powers of the agent doing any work. But an agent *qua* substance appears to be causally impotent with respect to producing an intention absent the manifestation of her relevant causal powers. It is the manifestation of the agent's relevant causal powers at the time the agent comes to have the intention to *A* that appears to be doing the causal work in the production of the intention to *A*. But we assumed that the agent *qua* substance causally produces the agent's intention to *A*. Suppose this is so. It appears, then, that when an agent causes an intention to *A*, there is the agent *qua* object at *t* and the mutual manifestation of the causal powers of the agent at *t* and both appear to causally produce the intention to *A*. Assuming this is right, if we have a genuine case of causal overdetermination, then, by exclusion, the agent *qua* object at *t* should be able to causally produce the intention to *A and* the causal powers of the agent mutually manifested at *t* should be able to causally produce the intention to *A*. But the agent *qua* substance lacks the power to produce an intention apart from pos-

[31] For simplicity, I only mention the motivating reasons and agent-causal power as manifestation partners. The complete causal story would no doubt be more complicated involving more manifestation partners in a complex causal process.

[32] I have substituted 'nothing' for 'event' in the consequent of the sentence and struck substituted 'causally produce' for 'cause.'

sessing some relevant dispositional properties possessed and manifested at the time she produces an intention. And agent-causal power is only manifested when partnered with the appropriate manifestation partner(s), in this case, the agent's motivational reasons for action. If this is right, then it looks like it is the mutual manifestation of these properties of the agent at *t* that cause the agent's coming to have the intention to *A.* The agent *qua* substance is causally impotent without her causal powers. Therefore, an agent can only causally produce an intention to *A* in virtue of the mutual manifestation of the agent's relevant dispositional properties (including agent-causal power) at the time the intention is produced. So, again, agent-causation is not substance causation. The dispositional properties of the agent *qua* substance are doing all of the work. So premise (2) is justified and we have good reason for thinking that agent-causalism is false.

If my argument in this section is successful, then the relata of an agent-causal relation are the relevant mutually manifesting dispositional properties of the agent at a time (the causing) and the outcome that is causally produced by the manifestation of agent-causal power and the power's reciprocal dispositional partner. What happens *is* internal to the agent. The agent is involved. The dispositional properties are aspects of the agent. Because of their causal work, we have the truthmakers for our talk about agent's making decisions, etc. But it is the mutually manifesting dispositional properties of the agent, which partially characterize who the agent is, that are doing the causal work, not the agent *qua* substance. So it seems that versions of agent-causalism such as O'Connor's are untenable.

4 REPLIES

The agent-causalist is not without any resources to respond to the argument of the previous section. In this section I consider two replies based on some recent work by defenders of agent-causalism that can be offered in defense of the version of agent-causalism being examined in this paper.

4.1 FIRST REPLY

Causal powers are powers of *objects*, including agents.[33] And it is agents that do things, not ways they are. There is a unique kind of causal dependence that obtains between an agent and her action, and this dependence is upon the agent *qua* agent and not on some dispositional properties of the agent. Dispositional properties are not irrelevant. But they are merely causally relevant. They sup-

[33] The important differences between them notwithstanding, E. J. Lowe (2008, chaps. 6 and 7), Erasmus Mayr (2011), and Helen Steward (2011) defend variants of this type of argument. Lowe also defends the conceptual and ontological priority of agent-causation in general. Interestingly, when it comes to *human* agency, particularly free agency, Lowe (2008) characterizes agent-causal power in volitionist terms. Agents cause their actions by making choices (Lowe 2008, 157). Neither an agent nor an event is the cause of any choice. Moreover, the will is not a *causal* power. It is, rather, a *spontaneous* power that affords agents the dual ability libertarians regard as necessary for the exercise of free agency (Lowe 2008, 150).

port counterfactual claims about what would happen if an agent did or did not possess or manifest a property, but they are not causally efficacious, producing outcomes (Steward 2011, 400–401). When an agent causes an intention, *the agent* produces that outcome, *not* some properties of the agent. To think otherwise is to unjustifiably hypostasize powers.

4.1.1 RESPONSE TO THE FIRST REPLY

First, I will make a concession to the agent-causalist. The agent *qua* substance is causally relevant. If there is no agent, there are no properties. After all, properties are ways that objects (including agents) are. *But* it is the causal powers of the agent that produce an intention to *A*. This is so for reasons articulated by C. B. Martin. Martin writes that, "The object is causally operative in some event for particular effects only in virtue of some of its properties *rather* than others. It is not operative *holus bolus* for each and every effect. Therefore, properties are needed for causality. Without properties, objects are empty and predicates blind" (1996, 71; see also Mumford 1998, 119). It is worth noting that Martin is not simply asserting that properties are causally relevant. Rather it is dispositional properties that are directed at manifestations that result in outcomes we identify as the effects of causal processes. It is not the object *qua* object that has such intentionality. To the extent that the object does, it is in virtue of possessing a particular dispositional property. Of course, this leads us back to the arguments I offered in the previous section of this paper. The agent-causalist needs to show how an object, including an agent, can causally produce an outcome without telling us a story that is really about the dispositional properties possessed by the agent producing an outcome.

4.2 SECOND REPLY

In making his case against agent-causalism,[34] Randolph Clarke has argued that if agent-causalism is correct, then "Causation would . . . be a radically disunified phenomenon" (2003, 208). Clarke assumes an event-causal framework, but his general point is still germane. He writes that, "In a case of event causation, the causal power borne by a given property is exerted by an object's having that property at a certain time. In a case of substance causation, the power carried by the property is exerted by the object" (Clarke 2003, 208). In his response to Clarke, assuming the irreducible dispositionality of properties (as I have done here and Clarke does in his argument), O'Connor points to "a kind of variability of dispositional properties that warrants classifying them into different basic types." He asks "why may not the unity of *basic* dispositional properties simply consist in their making a net addition to the pool of causal powers?" (O'Connor 2009, 205).

My agent-causalist interlocutor, echoing O'Connor, may argue that my argument rests on the unwarranted assumption that all dispositional properties are

[34] See, specifically, Clarke (2003, chapter 10).

uniform with respect to how their causal influence is exerted. The agent-causalist would no doubt mention that agent-causal power is *sui generis* after all. So we should not expect the agent-causal power of an agent to produce an effect in the same way as other causal powers. Rather, agent-causal power confers a capacity on the *agent* who produces the effect. Any expectation of uniformity is based on unwarranted assumptions about the nature of dispositional properties and the causal powers they confer on objects.

4.2.1 RESPONSE TO THE SECOND REPLY

There is no doubt that there is variation in causation.[35] However, as Clarke notes, "the variation we are considering here is a more fundamental matter, one of the ontological category of causes . . . . To say that entities of both of these categories [objects and properties] can be causes is to say that causation can work in two dramatically different ways. Causation would then be a radically disunified phenomenon" (2003, 208). Do we have good reason to think that the unity across the varieties of causation is at high enough of a level of abstraction as to allow for objects and not their possessing dispositional properties at times to be doing causal work? I am not confident that we have been given any compelling reason for thinking this is the case. And the onus is on the agent-causalist to offer good reasons for thinking otherwise. Simply pointing out the variation in causation is not enough to show that we have good reason for accepting such a unique form of causation.

But humility is required of the critic of agent-causalism. Regarding finally settling this debate, on the one hand, what we face is ultimately an empirical matter that cannot be decisively resolved from the comfort of an armchair. However, on the other hand, the agent-causalist needs to do more than point out the variation in causation we find in the world for accepting the unique role of agent-causal power in the etiology of free agency. We need to have good reasons for accepting a doctrine that is ontologically suspect. And, as I noted in the second section of this paper, our higher-order commitments to a particular theory of action and agency should not be driving our basic ontological commitments. This is precisely what the agent-causalist appears to be doing. We do not need to wait for science to offer us a final verdict on whether there is causal uniformity across domains to know that we have better *prima facie* reasons for rejecting agent-causalism than accepting it.[36]

5 CONCLUSION

My purpose in this paper has been to show that agent-causalism is untenable. I may not have succeeded in achieving this goal. Another sub-task of this paper

[35] Clarke acknowledges as much (2003, 208).

[36] Clarke (2003, chapter 10), stands out among the critiques of irreducible agent-causation. Unlike much work on agent-causation, Clarke does not simply express frustration over the unintelligibility and mysteriousness of agent-causation but offers a very careful critical case that highlights multiple problems with agent-causation.

that has proven to be no less daunting has been to show that the resources of some prominent accounts of the ontology of causal powers will not help the agent-causalist. I am more optimistic about my success with respect to achieving this second goal. But whether or not I have enjoyed success with respect to either of these goals, what I hope is evident from the foregoing is that work in the philosophy of agency can benefit from being more ontologically serious. Work on the ontological foundations of our theories of action and agency can aid in facilitating the task of evaluating the various options. The end result, I expect, would be that we enjoy some progress in our thinking about human agency.[37]

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[37] Earlier versions of this paper were read at the Beijing International Symposium on Human Action and Human Knowledge at the Institute of Foreign Philosophy at Peking University in Beijing, China, September 26–29, 2010; the Second Conference on Responsibility, Agency, and Persons held at the University of San Francisco, September 16–17, 2011; and at the Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Seattle, Washington, April 4–7, 2012. Thanks are due to the audience members at each conference, especially Maria Alvarez, Erasmus Mayr, David Robb, Scott Sehon, and Helen Steward for pressing me on a number of points. Extra thanks are due to my commentators at the conferences in San Francisco and Seattle, Timothy O'Connor and Jonathan Jacobs, for their incisive comments and the challenges they raised. Much of the research and initial work on this paper was done while I was a participant in the 2009 National Endowment for the Humanities Seminar on Metaphysics and Mind led by John Heil. I am grateful to the NEH for supporting my research on this and other projects. The views expressed in this paper do not reflect those of the NEH. Finally, I am grateful to Michael Brent, John Heil, Robert Kane, E. J. Lowe, Erasmus Mayr, and Dennis Mulqueen for their helpful written comments on drafts of this paper. I am fully responsible for the mistakes that are no doubt lurking in this article.

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