

DOINGS AND SUBJECT CAUSATION¹

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1. Doings

In this paper I will be primarily concerned with doings or activities rather than with the more specific case of actions.² Many things we do in our daily lives are not actions. A person caught in her thoughts might smile, scratch her head, stand up and walk around. Under normal circumstances these activities are not actions, they are only doings. Doings are often done without reason. The author of a doing need not notice what she does.³ Most bodily movements of human and non-human animals while awake are doings. Doings need not be controlled: the spontaneous laughter after hearing a joke, the crying of a baby that longs for the presence of a parent or the happy smile of surprise when meeting a friend unexpectedly are examples of doings without control. Nonetheless the person is active in her laughing, crying or smiling.⁴ Counterexamples are – under normal circumstances - the movements of the heart or those involved in digestion. These things happen to the subject, they are not done; the subject is not actively involved. Not all doings involve visible movement. Directing one's attention towards a particular problem, trying to remember a detail about the face of a person one was familiar with as a child, consciously and intentionally comparing the expected outcome of different possible causes of action are activities without bodily movement. Many philosophers think that only human animals are capable of genuine action. I will not discuss this controversial claim. But surely doings are not restricted to the human domain. The jump of a squirrel from one branch to the next, the yawning of a dog, the running away of a frightened mouse, all these are cases of genuine activities.

Is there a clear cut line between actions and mere doings and between doings and non-doings? What are the criteria that distinguish actions from mere doings and doings in

¹ I am grateful to Kati Balog, Ansgar Beckermann, Max Drömmner and Barry Loewer for discussions about the topic of mental causation that helped me a lot to get clearer about the view sketched in the present paper.

² I will use the terms "doings" and "activities" in an interchangeable manner.

³ I tend to think that there is always – in fact or even necessarily – some phenomenal awareness of every doing. To notice one's own doing, however, requires more than phenomenal awareness. While talking a person's attention might be caught by her interlocutor's objection in such a way that she does not notice her own arm movements although she is at the same time phenomenally aware of moving her arms.

⁴ For a bit more about the distinction between being active and controlling see section 3 below.

general from events that are no activities? I will not presuppose any specific account of what makes a particular doing an action. There are clear positive cases. Something done on the basis of conscious previous deliberation about open alternatives is a genuine action. But some actions are neither preceded by conscious deliberation nor by any conscious decision. Zinedine Zidane's shocking attack against Marco Materazzi surely was a genuine action, - an action out of emotion, without previous deliberation and without any conscious previous decision. Zidane's attack does not seem to be a borderline case between actions and mere doings. But there probably are such borderline cases. Even on the basis of the most adequate account of actions (as opposed to mere doings) it might be impossible in some cases to decide whether or not a given doing is a genuine act. It seems less plausible to me that there are borderline cases between doings and mere happenings as well. What makes an event a doing is the fact that the subject at issue is active in that doing. One might well think that in any particular case there must be an answer to the question of whether or not the subject at issue is actively involved.

It is, of course, not easy to say what it is to be active in one's doings. I will propose a specific account of the difference between doings and mere happenings that will involve the idea of what I will call subject causation. In a doing the subject is itself, or so I will claim, a cause of what happens. This specific account of doings will be controversial. But even those who will reject this particular account will, I hope, agree with the following claims: (a) doings – in the sense here introduced by a few paradigmatic examples – form a specific class of happenings which have some philosophically relevant feature in common. (b) This common feature of doings is appropriately captured saying that the subject is active in every doing and only in its doings. (c) Doings form a much broader class than actions.

2. A phenomenological claim

The view I will sketch in the present paper is based on an intuitive idea that I take to be a phenomenological insight. The intuitive idea at issue is a claim about the content of our experiences whenever we do something and whenever we perceive other conscious individuals in their activities. Let me begin with the second case. Remember your

experiences while observing a squirrel that runs around, takes up objects, runs up a tree and jumps elegantly from one branch to another. If you are like most people then you will be convinced that the squirrel is a subject of experience. Not only do you believe that the squirrel is an experiencing individual but you also *perceive it as such*. It is part of the way you see the squirrel that you see it as a subject with its own 'perspective'. To see a human or non-human animal as a subject of experience involves being implicitly aware, in that experience, of the fact that there is 'someone' who experiences the environment from a specific point of view and in a specific way. But the experience of an animal as a subject of experience normally not only involves being aware of the fact that there is 'someone' who has experiences, it involves furthermore awareness of something we might call spontaneity. Seeing e.g. a squirrel as a subject of experience involves in addition to seeing it as having experiences seeing it as being active. Seeing a squirrel as a subject of experience involves seeing a great part of its bodily movements as genuine activities. The jump of a squirrel from one branch to another does not look to someone who sees the squirrel as a subject of experience like the mere result of some inner mechanical process. It looks like something done by the squirrel, by the subject at issue itself.

The jump of a squirrel is a special case: the squirrel does something at the very beginning, a sudden movement of its legs and the rest happens. In the air between the branches the squirrel is not active or need not be active to complete the jump. So in a sense the movement is initiated by the squirrel itself but the following translocation of the squirrel's body from one branch towards another is merely a physical causal consequence. Carefully observing a squirrel in its jumping we see the squirrel itself as being active in the movement at the beginning of the jump. In other cases, however, there is no short initiating phase followed by a longer passive part of the event, rather the movement is seen as constantly and simultaneously produced by the subject itself even if extended within a longer period of time. The subject is – according to our way to experience these events – constantly and continuously active in its temporally extended doings. The piano player is active in her movements of the fingers during the whole concert. The elephant is active when it slowly reaches out with its trunk for an object at some distance. We see the piano player as being active during the whole piece and we see the elephant as being active during the whole movement. If this is correct then it is

part of the content of experiences of this kind that the subject at issue is constantly and simultaneously active in its doings.

An analogous claim applies to the way we perceive ourselves in our own doings. In doing something we are at least normally phenomenally aware of doing something. To be phenomenally aware of doing something involves the experience of oneself as being active. In doing something we experience our own spontaneity. We are aware of the difference between those cases where something merely happens to us and those cases where we directly bring about what happens. This is also true for the case of thinking. On the basis of the way we experience our own thinking we can for instance distinguish a case where we actively direct our attention towards a problem from a case where the problem pops up in our mind without our active contribution.

To sum up, the phenomenological claim is this: it is part of the content of our experience whenever we do something that we are active in that doing and it is part of our content of perceptual experience when we observe others in their doings that they are active in what they do. By saying this and using the still quite vague term “being active in one’s doings” I am trying to remain neutral with respect to the interpretation and the theoretical account of that experiential content. For the moment I am still trying to simply point to a particular aspect of our daily experiences, to the aspect of having a specific kind of content. If that pointing is successful then the reader should be able to identify the aspect I am talking about in his or her own experience.

I will claim that the aspect at issue must be described as follows: we experience ourselves in our own doings and other conscious individuals in their doings as being a *causal origin* of what happens. To say this is to begin a theory about the experiential content at issue. To search for a theoretical account of the content at issue is of course something quite different from simply identifying the content by drawing the reader’s attention to that particular aspect of the way we experience ourselves and others. On the basis of the examples and the comments given the reader might understand what aspect is at issue and still withhold opinion about or disagree with the theoretical account that will be proposed. My main aim in this paper is to draw attention to that particular content of our experiences and to convince the reader of its philosophical relevance. An

account of the relevant sense of being active in one's doings is, I believe, a central task for the philosophy of agency as well as for the philosophy of consciousness.

3. Possible misunderstandings of the phenomenological claim

The experience of being active in one's doings should not be confused with the experience of control in the sense of being able to prevent what happens. Something that merely happens to a subject maybe something the subject could interrupt if there was reason to do so. A person may e.g. enjoy bodily events that happen to her during sexual excitement and be able to interrupt those events if necessary. But the bodily events involved are not experienced as doings, the person does not normally experience herself as being active in bringing these events about (although she maybe active and experience herself as being active in creating a situation that makes those happenings likely to occur).⁵ The experience of being active in one's doings should not be confused either with the experience of intentional simultaneous control. We sometimes do experience ourselves as consciously and intentionally controlling the details of our movements. This kind of experience can be present e.g. in practicing the movements of the fingers in a part of a piano piece or when crossing a river walking over slippery stones. But in many cases of experiencing oneself as being active we do not experience ourselves as being involved in this kind of conscious and intentional control. The same applies to the case of experiencing others. To see the squirrel as being active in its movements is not to see the squirrel as being consciously and intentionally controlling the details of its own movement. Some activities are clearly such that we have little or no control over many details of the movement. Playing a complex and well practiced piece of music on an instrument is impossible without relying on a complex learned motor program that in great part could not be replaced by intentionally guiding the way one moves. Leaving a great part of the control to that program we can still consciously and intentionally control some other details, e.g. the musical expression in the piece we are playing. But even in cases where such conscious intentional control is completely absent we are still active in the playing of the instrument and still experience ourselves as being active in those movements.

⁵ The notion of control in the sense of being able to intervene is crucial for Harry Frankfurt theory of agency (see Frankfurt, 1978). What has just been said implies that the notion of being active in the sense here at issue cannot be capture by Frankfurt's notion of control.

Another mistake would be to confuse experiencing oneself as active in one's doings with being in some sense conscious of the event involved. A person may be reflexively aware of the fact that her arm moves upwards and yet not experience herself as being active in that happening (the arm might rise as a consequence of some externally induced neural stimulation). The same remark applies to mere phenomenal awareness without any second order reflexive thought. To be phenomenally aware of a bodily change is obviously different from experiencing oneself as actively bringing that change about. Experiencing oneself as active in a doing cannot be equated with experiencing some causal connection between one's own intention to do something and the relevant change. When a person experiences herself as actively raising her arm she does not thereby have an experience with the following content: I have the intention to raise the arm and the intention causes my arm to go up.⁶ We can be aware of actively executing a movement without being aware of any intention to move.⁷ Furthermore it is surely not the case that we experience our own intention as causing a movement whenever we experience ourselves as active in a bodily doing. I doubt that we ever experience our intentions or other mental events or processes (like beliefs or desires) as causing the relevant bodily change. Another mistaken proposal (maybe too absurd to be worth mentioning) would be to interpret the experience of being active in one's doings as phenomenal awareness of one's own muzzle contraction. Muzzle contractions can be phenomenally present in one's experience even if they are mere happenings (like for instance in a muzzle cramp) and in many activities (e.g. in drawing one's attention to a particular problem) there is no muzzle contraction involved anyway.

It is often said that we experience ourselves as the author of our own action and that explicating the sense in which we really are the author of our own actions is one central task for every philosophical account of agency. According to a widely accepted approach we are the author of our own action in the sense of the action being the causal result of appropriate mental states (e.g. of beliefs and desires that would 'rationalize' the action). It should be clear from what has been said so far that experiencing oneself as active in a doing is not to be confused with experiencing oneself as the author of an action in the

⁶ Here I agree with Terry Horgan's phenomenological claims in his paper for this volume, page *.

⁷ This claim is obviously true for intentions that precede the movement. However, with respect to what John Searle has called "intentions in action" the claim may be doubted. (Compare Searle, 1983, chapter 3, section VII). A clarification of this point would need a discussion of the relation between the notion of being active here at issue and Searle's notion of intention in action which I have to leave to another occasion.

sense proposed by the approach just mentioned. Many of our doings are a-rational. They are not done for any reason. They are not based on rational deliberation nor are they causally produced by beliefs and desires that could rationalize them. A person sitting in a train and moving her head from time to time from one side to the other does not move her head for any reason. There is no deliberation involved and no choice from a set of alternatives, and it is implausible to assume that there are any unconscious wishes and desires that bring these movements about and could rationalize them. Much or most of our active behavior falls outside the realm of rationality. But even in doings that fall outside the realm of rationality we experience ourselves as active. The experience of being active in these doings has nothing to do with experiencing them (mistakenly in that case) as being the result of some rational process. Being active and experiencing oneself as active has nothing to do with rationality. We experience ourselves as active even in doings that are done without reason and we experience other conscious individuals as active even if they belong to a species of animals incapable of acting on the basis of reasons.

4. Subject Causation

The content of experiences in which we experience a subject as active in its doings is – or so I claim – to be interpreted in this way: the subject itself is a causal origin of what happens. The subject causes or partially causes the relevant physical events. If this account is correct then a great part of our daily experiences would be illusionary if the philosophical thesis of subject causation was false. According to that thesis the subject is itself a cause. The subject simultaneously and continuously causes physical events whenever it does something.⁸

In what follows I will try to develop the thesis of subject causation. In doing this I will leave the level of mere phenomenological description. I said that the thesis of subject causation must be true if our relevant experiences of conscious beings involved in their activities are veridical. However, in theoretically elaborating the thesis of subject causation I do not claim that every detail of this elaboration is to be considered part of the content of our relevant experiences. My phenomenological claim is weaker. The

⁸ To avoid misunderstandings of these claims compare section 6, last paragraph.

most essential elements of the thesis of subject causation must be true if our perception of others and our experience of ourselves as active subjects are not illusionary. For the moment I will not bother to identify these essential elements and to distinguish them of those that may be false even if our relevant experiences are veridical. In some cases the issue might be difficult or even impossible to decide.

The idea of subject causation here defended is obviously related to the different versions of agent causation present in the philosophical literature.⁹ Theories of agent causation and the present claim of subject causation share the idea that the active subject is itself a cause. Both approaches imply the existence of a further causal relation in addition to the relation of causation between events: a causal relation that obtains between subjects (as causes) and events (as causal effects). The thesis of agent causation is however – as the name clearly suggests – restricted to the case of actions. Most agent causation theorists are explicit in limiting the claim to the human case; some even restrict the claim to the case of particular free acts that are morally motivated.¹⁰ Contrary to this the claim of subject causation here proposed is not restricted to actions and not restricted to humans. Subject causation is present – according to that claim – in every case of a doing.

Most versions of agent causation invite, furthermore, a specific picture about the causal influence of the subject at issue that seems to me to be quite mistaken: the agent – according to this picture – only intervenes at some specific isolated points in the causal process that brings e.g. a particular bodily movement about. The agent intervenes e.g. at some specific moment when a choice between open alternatives is taken; after the choice, things develop in their normal ‘mechanically determined’ way. According to that picture there are only a few quite special points in the course of events where the future is underdetermined by normal physical event causality and where there is room for the agent to causally intervene by choosing one of a number of open alternatives. The picture I propose is quite different. Subject causation is not an isolated rare phenomenon. Rather, subject causation is constantly present in every moment while a

⁹ Roderick M. Chisholm famously hold an agent causation view at some point (see Chisholm, R.M., 1976). More recently a new detailed elaboration of a version of the view has been developed by Timothy O'Connor (see O'Connor, 2000).

¹⁰ Agent causation is restricted to the case of moral choices in Campbell (1967).

conscious individual is awake. Subject causation is not 'point-like', it is extended in time; the subject continuously influences what happens. This is, I contend, the picture that is forced upon us if we take the phenomenology of our experience seriously. If I raise my arm then I do not experience myself as producing some mental event that in turn causes the physical event of my arm's going up. I do not experience my bodily movements as caused by some preceding event I have brought about. Rather I experience myself as causing the movement during the whole movement. Phenomenology suggests that subject causation causes the movement while it is taking place and in many cases during the whole movement. The same applies to mental activities. A person may direct its attention upon the specific color of the sky. In doing so she will experience herself as causing the upholding of that attention during the whole period in which the attention is directed upon that specific color.

5. *Dualism*

Subject causation cannot be accepted without also accepting some version of substance dualism. If the subject was identical to its brain or its body then subject causation would imply that the brain (or the body) as a whole causes certain events, an idea that clearly does not make sense.¹¹ If we use the term substance dualism for every theory that involves the claim that the subject of experience is not a material thing (not identical to its body or to any part of its body), then we can say that the thesis of subject causation presupposes substance dualism. The version of substance dualism that should in my view be combined with subject causation is a weak version of substance dualism, freed from a number of assumptions that have traditionally been associated with that kind of view. I will briefly characterize the version of substance dualism I have in mind.

The subject of experience is the individual thing that has consciousness properties (the property of experiencing something, the property of believing, wishing or fearing something, the property of reflecting about a problem, the property of intending or doing something, etc.). There is some reason to think that it is in principle impossible to have any of these consciousness properties without having a body. The version of substance dualism at issue does not imply that subjects of experience can exist without having a

¹¹ For a discussion of whether agent causation requires subject dualism compare O'Connor (2002), section 2.2.

body and, of course, it does not imply their eternal existence. Subjects *have* bodies, according to that view, as opposed to *being* bodies. To have a particular organism as one's body is to stand in a certain intimate relation to that body: if subject S has the organism O as its body then damage to O will normally cause pains for S and S will act with that body: if S raises its arm then it is the arm of O that moves upwards. This intimate relation (a relation we are well acquainted with on the basis of our daily experience) is not a relation of metaphysical composition. Some traditional substance dualists claim that the person is metaphysically composed of two parts, - a soul and a body. According to that traditional view, if we refer to a person using its name or if a person refers to herself using the first person pronoun, then the referent is a thing composed of a body and a soul. This is not the picture here proposed. When using names of people (or of dogs or horses or cats or dolphins) we refer to the subject of experience that has the body at issue. When using the first person pronoun we refer to ourselves, to a subject of experience, to the subject who has the body that is ours. This version of substance dualism, I will call it neo-substance dualism, does not imply the existence of 'souls' as conceived of in religious thought. Souls are often thought of as something that is in some sense composed of non-material matter and that is in some sense only a part of the person. Subjects of experience according to neo-substance dualism are not composed of any material. They are not composed at all. There is no reason for the neo-substance dualist to posit the existence of non-material stuff. Souls are also thought of as capable to be *in* the body and to leave the body. Subjects of experience are neither in the body nor can we think of them as leaving the body as if flying away. Subjects of experience are located in a derivative sense; they are located in virtue of having a located body. Some of the problems of traditional substance dualism can be avoided by adopting this new version of substance dualism. But neo-substance dualism inherits a number of serious problems from traditional substance dualism. There is no room however in the present paper to address these difficulties.¹²

6. Open Questions

¹² For a more extended discussion of neo-substance dualism see my book (2006) chapter 5. (An English translation is in preparation.) One often cited problem is the puzzle about how non-material substances can have causal impact on material things. Jaegwon Kim has developed a version of this objection against any substance dualist theory in chapter 3 of his new book (Jaegwon Kim, 2005). This objection will be discussed in my review of the book (in preparation for *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*).

A number of additional problems for the thesis of subject causation cannot be treated in a satisfactory way in the present paper. I would like to briefly mention a few of them. One difficulty concerns the causal relevance of psychological preconditions (like the person's beliefs and desires) for what the person does. The difficulty may be illustrated by the example of a choice taken on the basis of conscious reflection. Let us assume that a person decides to move her arm in order to vote for a particular candidate after careful reflection upon the different alternatives. Her reflection led her to form the belief that Mr. X is the best candidate. She chooses to vote for Mr. X on the basis of this belief and her desire to vote for the best candidate. Her choice is the reason why she moves her arm in the appropriate way at the appropriate moment. According to the view here proposed the person is active in her choice as well as in her movement. This is to say that the person is itself a cause of the neurological process underlying the choice and that the person is itself a cause of some of the neurological processes leading to the movement of the arm. In both cases the causation of the processes at issue by the person itself is not itself caused by previous events. So the following view is *not* open to a philosopher who believes in subject causation: actualized beliefs and desires cause the choice and the choice causes the movement. Rather, the philosopher who defends the idea of subject causation must insist that the choice is *motivated* but *not caused* by beliefs and desires and that the movement is motivated but not caused by the previous choice. As this example shows the claim of subject causation requires the introduction of a non-causal notion of motivation. This is the first problem that needs to be handled: a developed theory of subject causation has to include a convincing theory of non-causal motivation.

Another related problem concerns the way in which subject causation and normal event causation are supposed to interact. It is clear that the particular way a person moves in a given activity depends causally on preceding neural events. The case of a piano player can illustrate the problem. The activation of a particular motor program must be a partial cause of the particular movements of the fingers while the person plays a given piece. According to the claim of subject causation there is a further cause involved: the person himself who causes the movement. But if both ideas are true then we need an account of how the two causes, the neural event and the person, cooperate to bring the result about. It seems to me that something like the following description goes in the right direction: the activation of the motor program is a necessary physiological preparation for a movement of a particular pattern to occur. But without the causation by the person

the pattern at issue would not be realized. Subject causation thus is an additional necessary condition for the movement.¹³

A further problem for the theorist who defends the claim of subject causation is to specify the event caused by the subject in a given activity.¹⁴ The event caused is not the doing itself. It would be inappropriate to say that a person who plays the piano causes her playing of the piano. If by “her playing the piano” we refer to the doing at issue then the causation by the person is an essential part of the piano playing. But the person does not cause her own causing. So the event caused in a doing is not the doing. It seems clear that the events immediately caused by a subject in a given activity are neural events in the brain. Even in the case of a simple and short doing like kicking a ball into a goal there won’t be one single event caused by the subject but rather a number of different events that are causally and otherwise interrelated. Activities like directing one’s attention in a particular way, imagining the right kick, moving the legs, etc. are all part of the activity and involve the causation of different interrelated neural processes. It is impossible to give a precise account of the events caused by the subject in a given activity without heavily relying on empirical knowledge about the underlying neural processes.

At this point, however, an objection against the approach here presented may come to mind.¹⁵ We do experience ourselves and others as in some sense active in our doings but we do *not* experience ourselves and others as causing brain events. People experienced themselves as active already at a time where the role of the brain was unknown. Therefore the claim of subject causation cannot be defended by pointing out that its denial would imply massive illusion in the way we experience ourselves and others. It follows that the phenomenological argument in favor of the claim of subject causation given above is unsuccessful. The answer to this objection, I think, should be elaborated along the following lines. We experience ourselves as active in the sense of bringing something about in our doings. When moving the arm upwards we experience ourselves as bringing that physical change about. This piece of phenomenology restricts

¹³ Other aspects of the issue about the relation between subject causation and mental event causation are addressed in my paper (2006), section 6.

¹⁴ Different possibilities have been proposed by agent causation theorists; for a brief overview see Timothy O’Connor (2002), section 2.4.

¹⁵ I owe my awareness of this problem to Katia Saporiti who raised a similar objection after my talk at the meeting in honor of Ansgar Beckermann (July 2005, department of philosophy, Bielefeld).

the way the world can be if our experience of our own activities and our perception of others in their activities are veridical. I defended the view that being active in one's doings in the sense relevant for the content of our experiences has to be interpreted causally in the sense of subject causation. But this specific philosophical interpretation is not dictated by phenomenology alone. The claim about the correct interpretation is a theoretical claim about how the world must be in order for the experiences at issue to conform to reality. This theoretical account must however be based on the exclusion of alternative interpretations by empirical and/or philosophical considerations. Phenomenology alone does not force us to interpret being active as being a cause of physical events. Also, the phenomenology of our experiences in being active and seeing others in their doings is quite open with respect to the nature of the event we *immediately* bring about or cause. The proponent of subject causation has to give additional arguments for the claim that the experiences at issue can only be veridical if the subject immediately causes relevant brain events. If this step in the argument is successful, however, then the claim of subject causation can be supported pointing out that to deny subject causation is to attribute massive error to the way we experience ourselves and others in being active. This phenomenological argument then goes through even though it is not part of the content of our experience that we are a causal origin of certain happenings in our brain.¹⁶

7. Simultaneous causation

It is common and natural to think about causation in general in a way that involves the idea of temporal order: the cause temporally precedes its effect. According to this view about causation the mental event that causes a physical event happens before the physical event. A dualist who wishes to defend the idea that the causing mental event, e.g. a decision to act in a specific way, is not itself caused by any previous event will be led to the following picture: the decision, a mental event, happens outside the physical realm and without any physical basis and causes some appropriate physical event which in turn causes e.g. a bodily movement. It seems quite obvious that we should resist this picture. Mental events require a physical basis. No decision can be taken without a

¹⁶ Philosophical reflection of a more theoretical kind as well as empirical evidence is required in addition.

simultaneous corresponding change in the brain. We should accept the following supervenience claim: there can be no difference between two individuals at time *t* with respect to the mental without a *simultaneous* difference with respect to the physical. A supervenience principle of this kind excludes the traditional dualist picture just sketched.

The agent causation theorist is not committed to the claim of a temporal order between the mental cause and the physical effect. To the contrary, the idea that the cause precedes the effect does not seem to be applicable to the case where a person is the cause. The person is no event and therefore cannot temporally precede any physical event. But the causation of a physical event by the person is itself an event and we can ask about *its* supposed temporal relation to the event caused by the person. Does the event of causation – according to the agent causation theorist – happen *before* the caused event? This would be a strange thing to say. After all an event is caused only at the moment in which it at least starts to happen. It seems to me – as mentioned earlier – that most proponents of agent causation have the following idea in mind: the person initiates the relevant event at its very beginning, – just like a kick to a ball may initiate its rolling down a hill.

Both dualist pictures of mental causation just mentioned appear to me unacceptable. The idea that there are mental events happening in some mental realm that precede their physical effects leads to serious problems. Mental events of the relevant kind are structured and they carry information. It is therefore difficult to see how they could occur without a physical basis unless we posit a mysterious mental quasi-spatially extended stuff *in which* they are assumed to happen. To assume – as an alternative – that the causing mental events are non-identical with brain events but nonetheless accompanied by corresponding simultaneous brain events does not seem to solve the problem. Among other difficulties it raises the much discussed issue about over-determination Jaegwon Kim has famously been working about for many years.¹⁷ On the other hand, the idea of an initiating cause at the beginning of the caused physical event appears to me unacceptable for phenomenological reasons: it does not conform to the way we experience our own activities and to the way we perceive others in their activities.

¹⁷ Compare in particular his recent formulation of the argument in Kim (2005), chapter 3.

Within a theory of subject causation I would like to propose an alternative view about the temporal relations involved; one might call the thesis at issue the claim of *simultaneous causal interaction*. The claim is highly speculative but as philosophers we are allowed and even sometimes obligated to speculate.

To explain the view of simultaneous causal interaction I will use the example of a conscious decision. A decision may be said to be a mental event in the following sense: it partially consists in the change of mental properties; the subject who takes the decision will be psychologically different after the decision. The subject will have changed some of its mental properties. However, the decision does not consist in that change of mental properties alone. In taking a decision the subject causes a change in its brain. The subject causes the occurrence of the physical process (or at least some parts of that process) that underlies its own decision. The causation of that physical process partially constitutes the decision. To take a decision is not just to change mentally in a specific way it is also to cause certain changes in one's own brain. According to this view, decisions – at least human decisions (let us leave issues about the conceivability of deciding angels apart) – are not pure mental events. They consist partially in the causation of physical events. The temporal relations involved may then be described as follows. The decision and the physical event that underlies the mental changes involved in the decision occupy identical time intervals. During the whole taking of the decision the subject is constantly causing the underlying brain event or certain aspects of it. The causation by the subject and the caused change happen at the same time. Any specific temporal part of the decision is simultaneously accompanied by a corresponding part of the physical event E and in each temporal part of the decision the person causes or partially causes the corresponding part (or some aspects of that corresponding part) of the neural event E. The claim holds true when considering smaller and smaller temporal parts. The latter remark makes it intuitively appropriate to talk of *continuous* simultaneous causation. In many, most or maybe even all cases continuous simultaneous causation between 'the mental' and the physical goes in both directions. In taking a decision the subject partially causes the brain event underlying the mental change and that physical event simultaneously causes changes in the phenomenology of the subject's experience; in the present case, for instance, the subject experiences itself as taking a decision. It is plausible to assume that this

experience is simultaneously caused by the physical event caused by the subject in its own decision.

The main objection against the present view – apart of its ontological ‘queerness’, as some will say – is its incompatibility with the causal closure of the physical. According to the view presented, not every cause of a physical event is itself a physical event. Every scientific or philosophical argument in favor of the causal closure of the physical is an argument against the present view and needs to be addressed in an elaborated defense of the view. It should be obvious however that the present proposal of simultaneous causation does a better job compared to traditional dualist proposals with respect to the integration of consciousness into an overall view about nature. No structured mental events happening independently of any physical event in some mental realm need to be posited. Mental events consist simply in the change of subjects with respect to their mental properties and in the causation of physical events by the subject. The view is compatible with a claim of nomological and even metaphysical supervenience: no mental change without a physical change at the same moment.¹⁸

8. Advantages of the view

According to the view I have been sketching, the brain would not work the way it works if it was not the basis of the mental life of some given subject of experience. If this is correct, then the occurrence of consciousness, even at a very low level, makes a difference for the functioning of the brain. The brain, according to that view, is not a physical mechanism: for many brain events there are no sufficient preceding physical causes. These events would not occur without the causal intervening of the subject of experience. The view has the advantage to allow for an evolutionary explanation of the development of consciousness. It should in principle be possible to explain why a brain with consciousness has better chances to continue its existence than an otherwise similar biological system without consciousness. Along these lines we cannot explain why consciousness occurs in the first place. But the view opens at least the *possibility* to explain the biological advantages of the emergence of consciousness.

¹⁸ It is often assumed that the claim of metaphysical supervenience characterizes materialism. In my view this is a mistake. Metaphysical supervenience is compatible with a dualist position. See also Terry Horgan (2006b, section 1) about this issue.

Although the view proposed implies that the brain is not a closed physical system it leaves the autonomy of neurophysiology to a large extent intact. Since the view is compatible with the supervenience claim mentioned earlier, any regularity at the level of consciousness will be mirrored by some regularity at the neuro-physiological level. The claim of subject causation does not exclude that the neurophysiologist discovers strict regularities at the level of neuro-physiological description. He or she might, for instance, describe those brain conditions in purely physiological terms that lead with high probability or even with certainty to a successful motor action (e.g. to kicking a ball into the goal provided that nobody intervenes). The neurophysiologist need not mention the causal role of the subject itself in e.g. directing its attention in a particular way since there will be a simultaneous neural event corresponding to the activity of attention directing that will be mentioned in the description of the relevant neural preconditions. Mentioning the subject and its activities in an empirical theory about the brain will not be necessary until concrete proposals for a reduction of neurophysiology to physics will be on the table. If the present view is correct then these proposals will fail. Until that moment, however, neurophysiology may go on doing successful empirical research without taking into account the causal role of the subject of experience for its explanatory and predictive purposes.

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