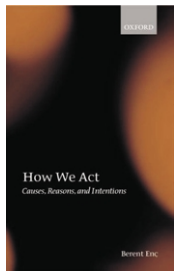


Looking for the agent in action

How We Act: Causes, Reasons and Intentions by Berent Enç, Oxford University Press, 2003. £30.00 (234 pages) ISBN 0 19 925602 0

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We all feel that there is an important difference between waking up and getting up. The latter is an action, the former isn't. But what exactly is the difference? This question is of central interest to anyone working on action, in philosophy and also in cognitive science. They will find much to stimulate them in the rich and detailed analyses the

philosopher Berent Enç provides in his clearly written and accessible book.

How We Act offers a comprehensive and thoroughly naturalistic account of action. Enç's approach falls squarely within the tradition of causal theories of action, the view that what sets actions apart from things that happen to us, or things that our bodies do in the course of their physiological functioning, is that they are caused by certain sorts of mental events. His purpose is to dispel two main worries. The first is that any attempt at giving necessary and sufficient conditions for some particular act's being an *action* (as opposed to mere behaviour) in terms of causal connections among events is doomed to failure because of the problem of causal deviance. The second worry is that by conceiving of action as the result of a causal chain of events, one removes the agent from the picture altogether and thus that causal theories of actions cannot accommodate a coherent notion of agency nor, therefore, other important notions associated with it, such as acting intentionally, acting in accordance to one's will, autonomy or freedom of action.

The first chapter of the book is directed against volitional theories of actions that claim that for an action to be voluntary it must be caused by a mental act – an act of the will or a volition – that does not yield itself to an analysis in terms of event causation. In order to avoid infinite regress arguments, volitionists have to posit volitions as irreducible basic mental acts. Enç points out difficulties with this move. In particular, it introduces a mysterious notion of agent-causation, thought to be distinct from and irreducible to event causation.

In Chapters 2 and 3, Enç develops a version of the causal theory of action that exploits a foundationalist conception of action in which basic and non-basic acts are distinguished. Drawing on studies of animal behaviour, a basic action is defined as a complex unit of behaviour, a pre-packaged whole, something an agent knows how to do without needing to use his or her knowledge of how to do something else in order to get it done – in other words without needing to control cognitively how it's done. Non-basic actions on the

other hand are actions whose results are generated by basic actions or by aggregates of basic actions.

Enç then turns to the problem of causal deviance (Chapter 4). It is easy to show that being caused by a seemingly appropriate mental antecedent, an intention, is not a sufficient condition for an event to qualify as an action, because the causal pathway leading from the intention to the action can be deviant. An example taken from the philosopher Lawrence Davis [1] may give a feeling for what the problem is. Suppose a romantic young man intends to get down on his knees to propose marriage. Contemplating his plan, he is so overcome with emotion that he suddenly feels weak and sink to his knees. Intuitively, his sinking to his knees is not an action even though it is caused by his intention to do so. To avoid this problem, the causal theorist must provide criteria for what constitute normal as opposed to deviant causal pathways and these criteria must themselves be amenable to a formulation in causal terms.

Enç argues that accounts of non-deviance that look for necessary and sufficient conditions in the structure of causal chains are bound to fail. His claim is that we should conceive of the agent as a well-functioning system and locate cases of deviance in those instances when the system does what it is supposed to do but not in the way it is supposed to do it. In other words, his own account exploits a teleological notion of function: an intention to produce a certain event causes this event in the way it is supposed to if and only if, for any intermediate link, X, from the intention to the event, the fact that the intention causes X is *explained* by the fact that X results in that event. Non-deviant causal pathways are those that meet this explanatory requirement. One important advantage of this novel strategy is that it promises to provide a unified and intuitively plausible treatment of various forms of causal deviance.

The second influential objection to the causal approach can be called the problem of 'the disappearance of the agent'. Causal events within the agent cause bodily movements, but the agent him- or herself doesn't seem to cause anything. Within the same kind of causal framework, one can also explain hard-wired, conditioned, or unconscious behaviour. The worry is that the causal theorist cannot in principle account for the important qualitative difference between these forms of behaviour – where imputations of agency are only a *façon de parler* – and rational action, but can only point to a quantitative difference in the complexity of the causal mechanisms involved. Chapter 5 is devoted to a defence against this objection. Enç argues that what is distinctive about rational action is the role played by deliberation, the weighing of the pros and cons of the consequences of one's prospective actions. He also claims

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that although this process of deliberation can be described in purely causal terms, the main qualitative difference between rational action and other forms of behaviour lies in the causal role played in deliberation by representations of conditional relationships of the form 'if under such and such conditions, X is done, then Y will result'. The having of such conditional representations allows a computational system to run a series of 'what-if' scenarios and to choose among alternative courses of action on the basis of their anticipated consequences.

In the following chapter, Enç explores the consequences of his causal model of deliberation for a theory of the nature and content of intentions and of the relation between intentions and intentional actions. Finally, Chapter 7 is devoted to showing that the notions of autonomy, the will and freedom are not beyond the reach of the causal theory of action.

How We Act offers one of the most thorough and systematic defences of the causal theory of action yet given. In this book, Enç brings into line the programme of naturalization in action theory with similar programmes in epistemology and the philosophy of mind. Enç's naturalistic stance is neither revisionary nor eliminativist. On the contrary, one of this main purposes is to show that a causal theory of action need not threaten our commonsense notions of agency, voluntary behaviour and freedom of acting.

Yet, one might fear that in his eagerness to preserve these notions, Enç sometimes assumes the very idea of agency whose existence is at stake. For instance, his definition of a basic action appeals to the idea of something an agent knows how to do without needing to use his or her knowledge of how to do something else and exploits the notion of prepackaged motor programmes. However, if one considers recent work in cognitive neuroscience of action on the complex hierarchy of levels of action organization and control [2], it appears that more or less complex prepackaged motor programmes can be found at several levels. It is therefore unclear that one can single out an unambiguous and serviceable notion of a basic action without implicitly assuming something like the

existence of 'the level of the agent' as distinct from lower, subpersonal levels. Similarly, recent neurocomputational work [3] strongly suggests the existence, at various levels of action control, of internal forward models that operate very much like Enç's proposed causal model of the process of deliberation and are used to run simulations of 'what-if' scenarios. Yet it is most unlikely that Enç would consider the existence and operation of such subpersonal internal models in, say, the cerebellum as sufficient for rational agency. He would presumably want to restrict the attribution of rational agency to creatures capable of personal-level deliberation.

No one to date has been able to articulate, in purely naturalistic and causal terms, a principled distinction between personal and subpersonal levels of events, states and processes. Whether the causal theory of action can truly preserve our intuitive notions of voluntary action, free agency, and autonomy ultimately depends on whether such a principled distinction can be articulated. This problem though is endemic to cognitive science at large and not just to naturalization programmes in action theory.

To sum up, even though *How We Act* may not completely allay the fears of those who remain attached to the common-sense notion of agency, the systematic treatment it provides of the main issues in philosophical action theory, and the original and detailed analyses it offers, should make it a stimulating read for anyone interested in human action and its causes.

References

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- 3 Wolpert, D.M. et al. (1998) Internal models in the cerebellum. *Trends Cogn. Sci.* 2, 338–347

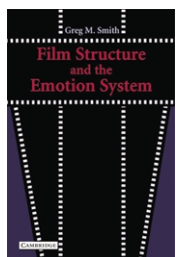
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Emotional payoffs

Film Structure and the Emotion System by Greg M. Smith, Cambridge University Press, 2003. \$55.00/£40.00 (230 pages), ISBN 0 521 81758 7

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Movies are hugely popular means of offering narratives to the public, and when we watch a movie we generally want to be moved by it. But, as Greg Smith of Georgia State University says in this book, there has been relatively little research on how emotions work in film. Smith acknowledges his debt to some of those who have done research

in this area: Noël Carroll, Ed Tan, and Torben Grodal [1–3]. He devotes a chapter to discussing each in turn before describing his own extension.

Smith's central idea is that movie makers work, to varying degrees, to induce emotions and moods by using devices that are familiar to analysts of film. Smith talks of cues to emotions, and I think this is a good way of talking. He says these cues include 'lighting, camera, acting, sound, music, mise-en-scene, character, narrative, genre conventions' (p. 8), and I do not doubt that writers, directors, camera people, actors, and editors of movies, do

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