

Philosophy of Action and Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract

The world's major monotheistic religions typically maintain that God freely chose, in the libertarian sense, to create the universe for a reason or purpose. Philosophers of religion often argue that the idea that God makes a free choice to create for a purpose is deeply flawed. In parallel with these philosophers of religion, philosophers of action typically argue that the idea that human beings make free choices to act for purposes is also flawed. I begin my article by briefly summarizing what is involved in the idea of a human agent freely choosing for a purpose. I then examine criticisms of this idea by philosophers of action and suggest how they might plausibly be rebutted. I conclude by suggesting that if these criticisms by philosophers of action are suspect, then there is good reason for thinking that the same or similar criticisms by philosophers of religion are suspect.

According to the world's monotheistic religions (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), God is an immaterial, metaphysically necessary being who chose to create our metaphysically contingent universe. This contingent universe includes the existence of both material and immaterial beings (souls or minds which, in the case of human beings, possess material bodies). God's choice to create our universe was an undetermined, mental action with a fundamental or ultimate *teleological* explanation in the form of a *reason*, *purpose*, or *goal*, where that reason includes the possibility of human beings experiencing the great good of eternal beatitude, blessedness, or happiness.

In order to understand how God might be the free creator of our universe, monotheists have often used their own free agency as human beings who make undetermined choices to act for purposes as an analogue for divine activity. The thinking here is that if immaterial, embodied souls are free to choose to act for ends that are believed to be good, then there is at least some justification for thinking that an immaterial, disembodied mind freely chose to create our universe for a reason that it knew was good.

What, then, is involved in our choosing to act for a purpose? In general, a teleological explanation of a choice to perform an action involves an agent (1) conceiving of or representing a future state of affairs in the content of a propositional attitude such as a belief or a desire, where that future state of affairs is an end or goal to be brought about because of its goodness; (2) conceiving of or representing in a belief the means to the realization or

bringing about of this end, where the means begin with the agent performing an action; and (3) making a choice to perform that action in order to bring about the end.

It is important to make clear that a reason (purpose) for a choice is not a propositional attitude (a belief or a desire, or the two combined) in the sense of its being a *particular event or ongoing state*. Rather, a reason (purpose) is conceptual in nature, an *ens rationis* or intentional object that is optative in mood and grounded in the *content* of a belief or desire that represents a future state of affairs as described in (1). The explanatory function of a reason is typically expressed by the *in order to* locution. For example, assume that a businesswoman, who is on the way to an important meeting that will further her career, sees a victim of a crime lying in an alley. Also assume that she believes that the victim has been harmed and that her helping the victim is morally right. In light of this belief, her reason or purpose for helping is that she do what is morally right (which, in terms of the first person, is that I do what is morally right), and the teleological explanatory relation of a choice to help is expressed by saying that she chooses to help the victim *in order to* achieve or bring about the purpose that she do what is morally right. If the businesswoman had chosen to continue on to the meeting because of her desire, say, that she further her career, the content of her reason for choosing would have been that she further her career (which, in terms of the first person, is that I further my career). She would have chosen *in order to* achieve or bring about the purpose that she advance her career.

An example of Jonathan Dancy's helps to clarify the explanatory nature of a reason (114). Assume that I am aware that a particular woman is ill and that I send for the doctor. Dancy maintains that it is the woman's being ill, an actual state of affairs of the world, that is my reason for sending for the doctor. Contrary to what Dancy asserts, however, it is not the woman's being ill that is my reason for sending for the doctor. Rather, my reason is the purpose that the woman be well, which is grounded in the content of a propositional attitude such as my desire that she be well (which represents a future non-actual state of affairs). Therefore, if I choose to send for the doctor, I do so in order to achieve or bring about the purpose that the woman be well.

Over the course of the last forty years, there has been an ongoing philosophical investigation of the view that human beings make undetermined choices for reasons (this view is commonly referred to as libertarianism). Perhaps the most influential paper in this investigation is Donald Davidson's "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" (3–19). In this paper, Davidson presents a challenge to anyone who believes that reasons are fundamentally or ultimately anything other than causes of the actions (choices) that they explain. He maintains that when we say things like "He chose to play golf because he wanted to close the business deal, and not because he wanted to avoid mowing the lawn," the sense of "because" in this statement must be causal in nature in light of the distinction between

having a reason (e.g., wanting to avoid mowing the lawn) and choosing to act *with* it and having a reason (e.g., wanting to close the business deal) and choosing to act *because* of it. One may *justify* a choice to act by citing a reason one has even if one did not choose because of it. One cannot *explain* a choice by citing a reason, however, unless one chose because of it. Davidson argues that if the sense of “because” is not causal, then we are left without an analysis of “because” in “He chose to do such-and-such because . . .,” where we go on to name a reason. Explanations in terms of reasons must, therefore, be causal explanations.

In virtue of the fact that Davidson thinks that a reason explains a choice only if it consists of what he calls a pro-attitude (e.g., a desire) and a belief,¹ his argument for the view that the sense of “because” with reasons that are explanatory must be causal in nature implies the following about the explanatory role of beliefs and desires: Whenever an agent chooses to act for a reason, he has a desire (for the sake of discussion, I will assume that the relevant pro-attitude is a desire) and a belief *prior* to and/or *simultaneously* with his choosing. It is the having by him (an event) of these propositional attitudes that causally explains his choice. The Davidsonian line is that it is either the eventful coming to have propositional attitudes such as desires and beliefs or the eventful persistence in having these attitudes that serves as the cause of the agent’s choice.

For clarification of what is presently at issue, consider an example of Carl Ginet’s in which agent S urgently needs her glasses which she has left in R’s room where R is now sleeping.

S has some desire to wake R, because she would then have R’s company, but also some desire not to wake R, because she knows that R needs the sleep. S [chooses] to enter R’s room in order to get her glasses, knowing as she does so that her action will satisfy her desire to wake R. Could it nevertheless be true that S did not intend of her action that it wake R? . . . It seems right to say that S did not intend to wake R if S was so disposed that had it turned out that her entering the room did not wake R, S would not have felt that her plan had failed to be completely realized, and she must then either wake R in some other way or decide to abandon part of her plan. And S’s being thus *uncommitted* to waking R is quite compatible with S’s expecting and desiring to wake R. (145–6, original emphasis)

According to Davidson, S has two reasons to enter R’s room, namely, a desire to wake R and a desire to get her glasses, and beliefs about how to fulfill these desires. S has two reasons that *justify* her entering R’s room. If S chooses to enter R’s room *because* of one of the reasons but not the other, this can only be because one of the reasons caused her so to choose. The reason that causes S’s choice *explains* that choice.

Davidson believes that explanations in terms of reasons are causal explanations. He also believes that reasons (desires, beliefs) and the choices explained by them are not linked together as psychological/mental events (as psychologically or mentally described) in a lawlike way. Because Davidson

holds that two events that are related causally must be linked together in a lawlike way (on his view, causation is a nomic concept), it must be the case that psychological events such as desires, beliefs, and choices also have a physical aspects (physical descriptions) under which they are linked together in a lawlike way. What seems to motivate Davidson's account at this point is a metaphysical conviction that no entity can undergo or be the subject of higher-level or macro-world psychological events (exemplify higher-level psychological properties) without also undergoing or being the subject of lower-level, micro-world physical events (exemplify lower-level physical properties), where the occurrences of the latter determine the occurrences of the former. This kind of relationship between the psychological and physical is often thought of as a *supervenience* relationship. Given that the psychological supervenes upon the physical, human choices are completely determined by what happens in the natural, physical world.

If our understanding of God's free, creative activity is drawn from our understanding of our own freedom to choose to act, and if Davidson's argument is sound, then there are at least two problems for the idea that God freely chooses to create our metaphysically contingent universe. First, God's reason for choosing to create causes his choice to create and, therefore, the idea that the fundamental explanation for God's choosing to create is a purpose is undermined. Second, because in our world what is psychological supervenes on what is physical, the idea of God's choosing to create a physical universe is problematic in so far as there is no physical universe prior to God's creative act upon which the choice to create it can supervene. Given the seriousness of this second problem, it is necessary to explain briefly why one might think it is reasonable to hold that choices and the reasons that explain them supervene on what is physical.

Proponents of the view that our psychological lives supervene on our physical lives typically appeal to the principle of causal closure (the causal closure of the physical world), which Karl Popper says is "the characteristic principle of physicalism or materialism" (Popper and Eccles 51).² According to the principle of causal closure, only physical events (or the physical properties of events) can be invoked in ultimate or final explanations of the occurrences of other physical events. Thus, according to the principle of the causal closure of the physical world, final or ultimate psychological (mental) explanations of physical events that refer to *purposes* of minds are in principle unacceptable and must not be invoked.

To put some flesh on the bones of the implications of the causal closure principle, consider its employment in the following example developed by Jaegwon Kim about a hypothetical neuroscientist who is studying what goes on in people's physical bodies when they raise their arms (131–2). To appreciate the force of Kim's argument, suppose that you are a patient of this neuroscientist. Presumably, on an occasion when you choose and/or intend to move your fingers and raise your arms (e.g., you are typing at a computer and raise your arms to stretch and relax), there are nerve impulses

that reach appropriate muscles and make those muscles contract with the result that your fingers move and your arms go up. Moreover, these nerve signals presumably originated in the activation of certain neurons in your brain. What caused those neurons to fire? According to the advocate of causal closure, we now have a quite detailed understanding of the process that leads to the firing of a neuron in terms of complex electrochemical processes involving ions in the fluid inside and outside a neuron, differences in voltage across cell membranes, and so forth. In other words, we have a pretty good picture in terms of the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology of the processes at the microphysical level that explain the movements of your fingers and the risings of your arms. If, by hypothesis, you are a soul in which occur non-physical, psychological events, at least one of which is capable of causing a neuron to emit a signal (or prevent it from doing so), then if this event is causally to produce the movements of your fingers and arms it must somehow intervene in these electrochemical processes. But how can this happen? How can an event involving a soul causally influence the state of some molecules? Does it electrically charge them or nudge them this way or that way? Surely, says the advocate of causal closure, in order to have a complete explanation of the complex processes that lead to the movements of your fingers and arms, the neuroscientist does not believe that he needs to include reference to a non-physical event that causally influences the molecular processes involved. Even if the idea of an event of a soul influencing the motion of a molecule is intelligible, the postulation of such an event is neither necessary nor helpful in explaining why and how your fingers and arms move.

Though Davidson's argument for understanding reasons as causes and the argument from causal closure are formidable, they have not gone unchallenged. Consider Davidson's argument first. Some have responded that contrary to what Davidson would have us believe, the distinction between justifying a choice and explaining a choice can be preserved when "because" is understood teleologically. In the case of agent S who was mentioned earlier, what understanding "because" teleologically implies is that S chose to enter R's room *in order to* achieve the purpose that she get her glasses but not in order to achieve the purpose that she wake R. There is a *fact of the matter* here, which is that S chose for one of the reasons and not the other. Teleological explanation makes reference to a *future* end of an agent (in S's case, that she gets her glasses) with respect to which she sees her chosen action as a means. What Davidson would wrongly have us believe is that this reference to a future *telos* or end must always be converted into a reference to a *prior* and/or *simultaneous* eventful *cause*, if we are to have an adequate explanation of an agent's choice. Given that the distinction to which Davidson draws our attention can be preserved when a reason explains a choice teleologically and not causally, it is plausible to think that God's choosing to create our universe can also be explained teleologically and not causally.

Next, consider the argument from causal closure. Some think that there is good reason to challenge it. To understand where they think the argument goes wrong, let us distinguish between a neuroscientist *qua ordinary human being* and a neuroscientist *qua physical scientist*. Surely a neuroscientist *qua ordinary human being* who is trying to understand how and why my fingers move and arms go up while I am typing must and would refer to my mental activity (e.g. a choice and/or intention) and my reasons (purposes) for that activity in a complete account of why my limbs move. Must he, however, *qua physical scientist*, avoid making such a reference? The advocate of the causal closure argument claims that the neuroscientist must avoid such a reference because *qua physical scientist* he must make an assumption about the causal closedness of the physical world. Is the neuroscientist *qua physical scientist* committed to causal closure, and if he is, is such a commitment incompatible with a commitment on his part *qua ordinary human being* to causal openness?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to consider what it is about physical entities that a physical scientist such as a neuroscientist is trying to discover in his experimental work. In the case of our neuroscientist, what he is trying to discover *qua physical scientist* are the *capacities* of particles or micro-physical entities such as neurons to be causally affected (moved) by exercised causal powers of other physical entities, including other neurons. For example, in his pioneering work on the brain Wilder Penfield produced movements in the limbs of patients by stimulating their cortical motor areas with an electrode. As Penfield observed the neural impulses that resulted from stimulation by the electrode, he had to assume that *during his experiments* the patients' brains were causally closed to other causal influences (e.g. mental acts of the subject or other agents). Otherwise, he could not conclude both that it was the electrode that causally affected the capacities of the neurons to be moved and that it was the causal impulses of those neurons that causally affected the capacities to be moved of neurons further down the causal chains. There is no reason, however, to think that because Penfield's investigation of the brain required the assumption of causal closedness *in the context of his experiments* that he also had to be committed *qua physical scientist* to the assumption that the physical world is *universally* (in every context) causally closed, where universal causal closure entails that the capacities to be moved of micro-physical entities can be causally actualized *only* by other physical entities and not also by persons when they indeterministically choose to act for purposes. That is, there is no reason to think that because a neuroscientist like Penfield must assume causal closedness in the context of his experimental work in order to discover how physical entities causally interact with each other that he must also be committed *qua physical scientist* to the universal explanatory exclusion of persons who choose to act for purposes and have the power to cause events to occur in the physical world when they choose. All that the neuroscientist *qua physical scientist* must assume is that persons are not causally actualizing the capacities to be moved of the

relevant micro-physical entities he is examining *during his experiments*. If the neuroscientist makes the presupposition that micro-physical entities can have their capacities to be moved actualized *only* by other physical entities to the exclusion of any explanatory reference to choices made by persons for purposes, then he does so not *qua physical scientist* but *qua physicalist or naturalist*, where a physicalist or naturalist is a person who believes that the occurrence of physical events can *only* be explained in terms of the occurrence of other physical or non-psychological events and without any reference to ultimate and irreducible purpose or teleology.

At this juncture, it is important to emphasize that in seeking to understand how different physical entities affect the capacities of micro-particles to be moved, a neuroscientist such as Penfield is seeking to learn about properties that are essentially *conditional* or *iffy* in nature. The following description of basic particles provided by the philosopher David Chalmers nicely captures this point:

Basic particles . . . are largely characterized in terms of their propensity to interact with other particles. Their mass and charge is specified, to be sure, but all that a specification of mass ultimately comes to is a propensity to be accelerated in certain ways [moved at certain rates] by forces, and so on. . . . Reference to the proton is fixed as the thing that causes interactions of a certain kind that combines in certain ways with other entities, and so on. (153)

What Chalmers describes as a “propensity” of a particle to be moved is a capacity of it to be moved which is such that *if* it is actualized by an exercised power of another entity (whether physical or non-physical in nature), the particle will be necessitated to move in a certain way.³ There is nothing, however, in the nature of the propensity or capacity of that particle that requires that it be actualized in accordance with physical laws in the sense that the physical world is closed to causal influence by persons making undetermined choices for reasons. Hence, the actualization of a micro-particle’s capacity to be moved by a person on an occasion when the latter makes a choice for a reason is not excluded by anything that is discovered in a scientific study of that capacity. And it is precisely on occasions like those noted by Kim, *when finger and arm movements seemingly occur for purposes*, that a neuroscientist will reasonably believe that the originaive micro-physical movements are ultimately traceable to the causal activity of a mind that is choosing to act for a purpose. The alternative is to maintain that psychological events (assuming that they are not ontologically and/or explanatorily reducible to physical events) are ultimately explanatorily impotent and the movements of my fingers and arms when typing are ultimately completely explained in non-psychological and, thereby, non-teleological, physical causes. What is psychological is epiphenomenal. Is this really believable?

If this response to the causal closure argument succeeds when that argument is employed against the explanation of certain physical events by teleologically explained human mental activity, then the same response can

be successfully given to that argument when it is mustered against a proposed causal explanation of certain physical events (such as the big bang or the resurrection of a dead person) by divine mental activity that is ultimately explained teleologically. And make no mistake about it: the causal closure argument is used in this latter way. The following two examples of such a use from books by Douglas Futuyma and Matthew Bagger respectively are sufficient for present purposes:

Science is the exercise of reason, and so is limited to questions that can be approached by the use of reason, questions that can be answered by the discovery of objective knowledge and the elucidation of natural laws of causation. In dealing with questions about the natural world, scientists must act as if they can be answered without recourse to supernatural powers . . . of God. (Futuyma 169–70)

We can never assert that, in principle, an event resists naturalistic [physical] explanation. A perfectly substantial, anomalous event, rather than providing evidence for the supernatural, merely calls into question our understanding of particular laws. In the modern era, this position fairly accurately represents the educated response to novelty. Rather than invoke the supernatural, we can always adjust our knowledge of the natural in extreme cases. In the modern age in actual inquiry, we never reach the point where we throw up our hands and appeal to divine intervention to explain a localized event like an extraordinary experience. (Bagger 13)

There are, to be sure, other criticisms that have been raised against the libertarian understanding of human freedom and the relevance of that freedom for explaining certain events in the physical world (e.g., the argument from the conservation of energy) that, if successful, would also provide reasons for doubting traditional monotheistic accounts of God's free activity. Given, however, that there are plausible responses to Davidson's argument about the nature of reasons explanations and the argument from causal closure, there is some reason for thinking that equally plausible responses can be given to these additional criticisms.⁴

Short Biography

Stewart Goetz is Professor of Philosophy at Ursinus College. He has written numerous papers on action theory and the philosophy of mind for journals and books. His most recent paper is entitled "Frankfurt-Style Counterexamples and Begging the Question," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy: Free Will and Moral Responsibility*, vol. 29. Eds. Peter A. French, Howard K. Wettstein, and John Martin Fischer (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2005), 83–105.

Notes

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¹ There is an ongoing debate about whether a belief by itself can provide a purpose that explains an agent's performance of an action (choice). Those who are inclined towards Hume's view that

reason is a slave of the passions (desires) think that it cannot. They sometimes argue for their view in terms of a propositional attitude's "direction of fit." Their claim is that because actions are performed in order to bring into existence what presently does not exist, and desires have an appropriate "world-to-mind" direction of fit, while the direction of fit of beliefs is "mind-to-world," beliefs alone cannot occupy the requisite explanatory role. For the sake of discussion, I will concede that a reason which explains an agent's action (choice) must at least partially be grounded in a desire. I think that Davidson's argument that a reason can explain a choice only if it causes the latter can be answered on the basis of this assumption.

² Popper adds, and then argues for the view, that "there is no reason to reject our prima facie view [the view that the physical world is open to mental, purposeful explanations]; a view that is inconsistent with the physicalist principle" (51).

³ The physicist Richard Feynman says scientific questions are "questions that you can put this way: 'if I do this, what will happen?' . . . And so the question 'If I do it what will happen?' is a typically scientific question" (16, 45).

⁴ See Collins; Goetz.

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