

**Causing Human Actions**

**New Perspectives on the Causal Theory of Action**

**edited by Jesús H. Aguilar and Andrei A. Buckareff**

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**Preface**

This volume brings together essays by some of the leading figures working in action theory today. What unifies all of the essays is that they either directly engage in debates over some aspect of the causal theory of action (CTA) or they indirectly engage with the CTA by focusing on issues that have significant consequences for the shape of a working CTA or the tenability of any version of the CTA. Some of the authors defend this theory, while others criticize it. What they all agree on is that the CTA occupies a central place in the philosophy of action and philosophy of mind as the "standard story of action." Two of the essays in this volume have appeared elsewhere recently. (Chapters 8 and 9 by Carolina Sartorio and Randolph Clarke, respectively, previously appeared in *Noûs*. They appear with the permission of Wiley-Blackwell, and have been lightly edited for consistency.) The remaining essays appear in this volume for the first time.

Editing this volume, though not an easy task, has been a labor of love for us. We are convinced that foundational issues in the philosophy of action, such as the issues explored in this volume, deserve greater attention. It is our hope that the publication of this collection of essays will serve to elevate the prominence of the debates the essays range over in future research on human action and agency. This volume, then, is in part an effort to promote exploration of foundational issues in action theory and especially to encourage further work on the CTA by defenders and critics alike.

Work on this volume would have been more difficult if not impossible without the support of a number of people and institutions. First, Philip Laughlin, Marc Lowenthal, and Thomas Stone from MIT Press deserve a special debt of gratitude for supporting this project. Also from MIT Press, we would like to thank Judy Feldmann for her fantastic editorial work. Thanks to Wiley-Blackwell for giving us the permission to publish the essays by Carolina Sartorio and Randolph Clarke which originally appeared

in *Noûs*, and to Ernest Sosa for providing some much-needed help with acquiring the permission to put these essays in our book. Second, we would like to thank the authors who contributed to this volume. This volume would not exist were it not for their efforts. Third, we would like to thank Joshua Knobe for his help in the editing process by reviewing the essays by Thomas Nadelhoffer, Josef Perner, and Johannes Roessler. His expertise in experimental philosophy and psychology far outstrips ours. His philosophical acumen with respect to all things action theoretic made him an obvious person to go to for help in reviewing these essays. Fourth, some of the work for this volume was carried out while Andrei Buckareff was a participant in the 2009 National Endowment for the Humanities Seminar on Metaphysics and Mind led by John Heil. Andrei wishes to thank the NEH for the financial support and John Heil for creating a seminar environment that afforded him the opportunity to complete some of the work on this and other projects. Fifth, thanks are due to the institutions we work at, Marist College and Rochester Institute of Technology, for their support of our work on this and other research projects. Andrei is especially thankful to Martin Shaffer, Dean of the School of Liberal Arts at Marist, and Thomas Wermuth, Vice President for Academic Affairs at Marist, for the course releases that gave him extra time to work on his research, including editing this volume. Jesús was awarded the Paul A. and Francena L. Miller Faculty Fellowship from the Rochester Institute of Technology to support part of the work involved in this volume, also in the form of course releases, something for which he is very grateful. Finally, extra special thanks are due to our families and friends for their tolerance and their support as we worked on this project. Andrei would especially like to thank his spouse, Lara Kasper-Buckareff, for her encouragement and patience with him, especially in the final weeks of working on this project. Likewise, Jesús is full of gratitude to Amy Wolf for her constant support during his work on this volume.

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## 1 The Causal Theory of Action: Origins and Issues

Jesús H. Aguilar and Andrei A. Buckareff

Philosophy of action is often construed either broadly as including all of the problems in philosophy dealing with human action and agency or more narrowly as concerned with merely the cluster of issues that deal directly with the nature of intentional action and the explanation of action. However we characterize the philosophy of action, one theory has recently enjoyed the title of “the standard story” of human action and agency in the literature, namely, the causal theory of action (CTA).<sup>1</sup>

Strictly speaking, it is misleading to think of the CTA as a single theory of action. A better way to think about the CTA is in terms of a set of theories that bear a family resemblance by accepting the following schema about what makes something an action and what explains an action:

(CTA) Any behavioral event *A* of an agent *S* is an action if and only if *S*'s *A*-ing is caused in the right way and causally explained by some appropriate nonactional mental item(s) that mediate or constitute *S*'s reasons for *A*-ing.<sup>2</sup>

If we focus on the ontological implications of this schema we can identify the source of the most significant differences among the several versions of the CTA, namely, differences over what it means to be “caused in the right way” and over what the appropriate nonactional mental item(s) is/are that should cause *S*'s *A*-ing in order for *S*'s *A*-ing to be an action. Similarly, if we focus on the epistemological implications of this schema, we can identify a significant difference between the CTA and other competing theories of action regarding the specific role of reasons in the explanation of action. In this way, we can use the CTA schema as a point of reference to identify the main features of the CTA, including both its ontological commitments and epistemological commitments, trace back its historical origins, and recognize the key areas of contention and development associated with this general view on action.

In this introduction we offer a brief historical examination of three key stages in the development of the CTA, namely, the *ancient classical* period represented by the work of Aristotle, the *early modern* period represented by the work of Thomas Hobbes, and the *contemporary* period represented by the work of Donald Davidson. This is to be followed by a general presentation of the main areas of debate related to contemporary versions of the CTA and a concise presentation of the contents of the chapters in this volume.

### 1 The Roots of the Contemporary CTA: Aristotle, Hobbes, and Davidson

All theories of action aim at providing answers to a set of foundational questions about human action and agency. These foundational questions have been articulated in the form of whether we can distinguish intentional action (such as winking) from mere behavior (such as blinking), or, as Wittgenstein famously put it, whether there is anything left over if one subtracts the fact of an arm going up from the fact of raising one's arm (Wittgenstein 1972, §621). Furthermore, the conclusions we reach in theorizing about the nature of action and agency will provide us with extra resources to address other nearby philosophical questions such as the problem of free agency, the mind–body problem, the problem of *akrasia*, and other related problems in metaphysics, moral philosophy, philosophy of law, and philosophy of mind, among other philosophical subdisciplines. Ideally, our results in action theory should also provide researchers in the behavioral and brain sciences with a broad conceptual framework for their research into human behavior.

But although the motivations for doing action theory and the benefits of working out one's ontological commitments about the nature of action are many, it has historically been a rather narrow set of concerns that have chiefly motivated philosophers to think about action. It should come as no surprise that at many points in the history of philosophy the primary motivation to theorize about the springs of action was a desire to understand the nature of moral agency. This is Alan Donagan's compelling way of formulating this crucial relationship between moral philosophy and theorizing about human action:

Since *ought* implies *can*, writings about morality presuppose much about human action. Yet although conclusions about action can defensibly be drawn from established moral theory, no moral theory can become established unless its presuppositions about action can be defended independently. (Donagan 1987, viii)<sup>3</sup>

When we examine the history of the philosophy of action, we find that Donagan is echoing sentiments about the importance of action theory found among many of the leading theorists in the history of philosophy; for the idea of intimately linking the possibility of morality to the possibility of action and agency has a long and prestigious genealogy, going back at least to the work of Aristotle.

#### 1.1 Aristotle

Although Aristotle was not the first major philosopher to write about action—Plato wrote about action before him (see, e.g., the *Phaedo* 98c–99a)—to our knowledge he was the first one to think seriously about the springs of action. Furthermore, the story he told about the role of the mental in the production and explanation of action was a causal story much along the lines of the above schema of the CTA. Such a proposal may be seen as anachronistic. After all, the CTA as a proper theory of action has only been identified under that title since the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, to the extent that Aristotle had a theory of action, his theory is clearly a progenitor of the CTA.<sup>5</sup>

Aristotle's commitment to a proto-CTA theory of action can be pieced together from portions of his *De anima* (DA), *De motu animalium* (Mot.), and *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE). The origin of action lies in the agent according to Aristotle (NE, Bk. III, ch. 1.20, 1111a, 23–24). Specifically, the springs of action are what we now identify as pro-attitudes.<sup>6</sup> For instance, he writes that, “the proximate reason for movement is desire [*ourexos*]”<sup>7</sup> (Mot. 701a35; cf. DA 433a10–434a20). In NE, Aristotle distinguishes between various types of desires. Of these types of desires two are of special interest in understanding his account of the springs of action. They are the intrinsic desires for what are deemed worthwhile ends (*boulēsis*)<sup>8</sup> and the instrumental proximal action-triggering desires for the means to achieving the ends (*prohairesis*).<sup>9</sup> A simple statement of the etiology of action is found in chapter 2 of Book VI of NE:

The origin of an action—the efficient cause, not the final cause—is *prohairesis*. The origin of *prohairesis* is another desire [*orexis*] and goal-directed reason [*eneka tinos*]. (NE, 1139a31–34)<sup>10</sup>

Thus, on the Aristotelian story of intentional action, (i) an agent *S* desires some end and believes that by *A-ing* she can satisfy her desire for that end; (ii) this gives rise to a desire (*prohairesis*) to *A*; and (iii) the immediate source (the efficient cause) of *S*'s subsequent *A-ing* is *S*'s desire (*prohairesis*) to *A*.