

Phil 317: Handout #22
Jennifer Hornsby: Agency and Causal Explanation

Professor JeeLoo Liu

§ Hornsby's Major Claims:

I. There are two points of view:

___ From the personal point of view, an action is a person's doing something for a reason, and her doing it is found intelligible when we know the reason that led her to it.

___ From the impersonal point of view, an action would be a link in a causal chain that could be viewed without paying any attention to people, the links being understood by reference to the world's causal workings.

II. The two views are not incompatible: action is a type of event whose causal ancestry is understood from a personal, rational point of view, and whose causal successors come to be understood from an impersonal, perhaps scientific one.

III. But action is not just an event; action should be seen as a person's initiating a series of events.

___ It seems that a threat to our sense of agency has been created by an illusion that we are trying to explain an event's occurrence when in fact we are trying to make sense of a person and what she did.

IV. Therefore, actions are not swallowed up from an external perspective, and the mental is not epiphenomenal.

§ Hornsby's Main Argument

- 1. An action is not merely an "event"; an action is always *someone's* action.**
- 2. *Agency* is indispensable when we are dealing with the causation of actions.**
- 3. In the case of agency causation, the word "because" explains both the *cause* and the *reason* for the agent's performing a certain action.**
- 4. Reason explanation provides us with a network of intelligible dependencies between the fact about what an agent thinks, what she wants, and what she does.**
- 5. This dependency is causal.**
- 6. Therefore, in the case of action, *causation* and *explanation* are inextricable; causality and explanatoriness enter the scene together. = [*Causal-explanation*]**

§ Hornsby's Critique of Davidson

___ (1) Davidson tries to view the mental impersonally, and thus the causal efficacy of the mental is lost.

___ (2) An action explanation tries to make sense of a person's doing something by seeing her as (at least approximately) rational -- as conforming (more or less) to norms of

consistency and coherence in her thought and practice, but there is no "ideal norm" that would apply to anyone.

___ (3) The Nomological Character of Causality does not apply to the causation of human actions: our justification for accepting an account of why someone did something would seem to have nothing to do with any reason we might have for believing in the world's nomological workings.

___ (4) Thus the search for the nomological character is not a goal for action explanations.

[Hornsby's Argument Against Davidson]:

1. In order to use the notion of a law to forge a connection between the causal-explanatory nature of a concept and the physical nature of the things it applies to, Davidson needs to set out the steps:

mental → causal-explanatory → /'purely causal'/ ← nomological ← physical

2. But the mental cannot move to the "purely causal" stage.

3. Thus if Davidson wants to push the nomological character of causality back to the mental, he would have to accept the conclusion that the mental is epiphenomenal.

§ Hornsby's Critique of Nagel

[Hornsby's Argument Against the Impersonal Point of View]:

1. A world 'of nature' is not to be thought of as constituted independently of the conscious beings that occupy it.

2. A world of nature is a world including us; it would not be complete if it did not contain us and that there was no participation on our part.

3. We, as *agents*, can initiate a series of events (i.e. our actions).

4. Our actions are done to accomplish our goals (wants and desires) from our personal point of view.

5. Therefore, to understand actions, one must understand the point of view from which the agent represents the world.

6. Therefore, causal explanations of actions are totally impossible from the impersonal point of view.

7. Therefore, without the personal point of view, one cannot furnish all the causal stories of the world of nature.