

Is our conception of agent-causation coherent?

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Penultimate Version

A significant number of incompatibilists have held that we can be morally responsible only if we are agent-causes -- agents who, fundamentally as substances, not merely as being involved in events or states, that is, not merely by virtue of exemplifying properties at specific times, can cause decisions without being causally determined to do so. It has often been argued that a conception of ourselves as morally responsible agent-causes is not coherent. Here I develop and assess several of the arguments for this claim. In my view, the defender of agent-causation has an adequate response to these objections, although it is unclear whether the agent-causal conception is ultimately coherent. The plausibility of the claim that we are agent-causes is a further issue, which I have considered elsewhere, and will not revisit here. ¹

1. Agent causation as remedy for problems faced by event-causal libertarian

The main problem for event-causal libertarianism, according to which indeterminism in the production of a decision by appropriate events is the key requirement for moral responsibility, is strongly suggested by a “luck” objection against it. Intuitively,

¹ Derk Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 59-88.

for an agent to be morally responsible for a decision, she must exercise a certain type and degree of control in making that decision.² According to this luck objection, given an event-causal libertarian picture, the relevant causal conditions antecedent to a decision – agent-involving events (or, alternatively, states or property-instances of the agent) -- would leave it open whether this decision will occur, and given that these antecedent conditions are in place, the agent has no further causal role in determining whether it does. Given that these antecedent conditions are in place, it remains open whether the decision occurs, and whether it does is not settled by the agent. Hence, the agent lacks the control required for being morally responsible for the decision.

To illustrate, consider Kane's example of a businesswoman who has the option of deciding to stop to assist a stranded motorist, whereupon she would be late for work, or not deciding to stop, which would allow her to make it to work on time.³ For simplicity, suppose the relevant antecedent conditions are, against stopping, *Grace's desiring at t not to annoy her irascible boss*, and *Grace's believing at t that if she is late for work her boss will give her a difficult time*; and for stopping, *Grace's desiring at t to help people in trouble*, and *Grace's belief that she can be effective in helping the stranded motorist*. Suppose the

² Derk Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will*, pp. 50-4. This argument has its origins in David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 399-412, esp. pp. 411-2. There are a number of versions of the argument; here I present the one I consider the strongest. Randolph Clarke has recently responded to a version, developed by Alfred Mele, that argues for non-responsibility from the absence of contrastive explanation; "Agent Causation and the Problem of Luck," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 86 (2005), pp. 408-421; Alfred Mele, "Libertarianism, Luck, and Control," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 86, pp. 381-407.

³ Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. Randolph Clarke, *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 74.

motivational force of each of these pairs of conditions for Grace is more or less equal. On the event-causal libertarian view, given that these antecedent conditions are in place, both Grace's deciding to stop and her not deciding to stop remain possible outcomes, and let us assume, each are still significantly probable outcomes. Suppose she decides to stop. With these antecedent conditions in place, there is nothing else – in particular, not Grace herself – to settle whether her decision to stop occurs. If at this point Grace cannot settle whether the decision occurs, she would appear to lack the control required for moral responsibility for the decision. This might be called “the problem of the disappearing agent” -- in the event-causal libertarian view, there is no provision in the theory that allows the agent to exercise control at this crucial point, and this is why she would lack the control required for moral responsibility. True, Grace is the subject of her decision to stop, but ‘being the subject of’ is not a causal relation, and, intuitively, the control that must be exercised would have to be causal.⁴

As Randolph Clarke points out, the problem need not be traced to the existence of a gap in the causal story from the agent-involving events to decisions (although it might be). For as David Armstrong has argued, on an indeterministic picture, the causal relation between one belief/desire pair and Grace's decision to stop need not be construed as being of a different sort than it would be on a deterministic picture.⁵ It is rather that whether this same sort of causal relation comes to be is not determined by antecedent

⁴ Randolph Clarke, *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 18; Timothy O'Connor, *Persons and Causes*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 25-6.

⁵ Randolph Clarke, *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will*, p. 74; David Armstrong, *A World of States of Affairs*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 238.

conditions. But still, if once these antecedent conditions are in place it remains unsettled whether this causal relation will come to be, and Grace has no further role in determining whether it does, then, intuitively, she will not be morally responsible for the decision

The force of this first step can be made clearer by imagining the event-causal libertarian story about Grace, except that whether the causal relation from the belief/desire pair to a decision to stop occurs is settled by a randomizing manipulator. The manipulator spins a dial that will land on one of two positions. The dial is internal to the agent, the spinning of the dial is a metaphysically indeterministic event, and the dial's landing on a position is the crucial indeterministic component of the neural realization of the possibilities for decision – of either Grace's deciding to stop, or of her not deciding to stop. Intuitively, she cannot be morally responsible for the decision. However, there is no difference between the manipulated scenario and the ordinary event-causal libertarian situation that could adequately explain how Grace might be not morally responsible in the former, but responsible in the latter, The problem in both cases is that Grace lacks the control in making the decision required for her to be morally responsible for it.

It is important to note that although the main problem for event-causal libertarianism is strongly suggested by the luck objection, the force of the concern can be strengthened by an additional argument. John Bishop and Randolph Clarke have urged that when antecedent causal conditions leave it open whether the decision will be made, the agent might still exercise direct proximal control in making the decision. For it may be that the key requirement for such direct proximal control is that the decision is caused in an appropriate way by agent-involving events. Clarke contends that on the story informed by Armstrong's suggestion, the event-causal libertarian is in no worse position than the

determinist for securing such direct proximal control -- in each case the causal relation between the proximally antecedent states and the decision (or intention formation) might be exactly the same. Still, even if the event-causal libertarian can secure this direct proximal control, the luck objection leads one to suspect that a further type or degree of control cannot be exercised, the type or degree that provides for moral responsibility. But at this point it might be objected that the luck objection does not conclusively establish that the agent might not exercise the requisite control just by virtue of the decision's being appropriately caused by agent-involving events.⁶ Here the additional argument has its role.

This argument has two steps. The first is a manipulation argument against the possibility of moral responsibility in a deterministic context. It is designed to show that an agent's moral responsibility for a decision is precluded by its being produced by a deterministic sequence of causal factors that traces back in time to factors beyond her control. Elsewhere, I've developed such an argument in detail.⁷ The argument concludes that in such a deterministic context, the agent lacks the control over her decisions required for moral responsibility. The second step is to argue that if factors beyond the agent's control, rather than determining a single decision, instead simply leave it open whether the decision will occur, and the agent has no greater role in the production of this decision than she does in the deterministic context, then there is no more reason to think that she is

⁶ John Bishop, *Natural Agency*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 71; Clarke, Randolph Clarke, *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will*, pp. 74-82.

⁷ Derk Pereboom, "Determinism al Dente," *Nous* 1995, pp. 25-45; *Living Without Free Will*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); "Defending Hard Incompatibilism," *Midwest Studies* 29, 2005, pp. 228-47.

morally responsible than there is in the deterministic context.⁸ The event-causal libertarian supplements the deterministic context only with relaxation of the causal net, and not with enhanced control.

Plausibly, what needs to be added to the event-causal libertarian story is a further causal involvement of the agent in the making of the decision, a causal involvement that would enhance her control in making a decision over what is present in the event-causal and the deterministic contexts. It is this enhanced control that would remedy the problem of the disappearing agent, highlighted by the luck objection against event-causal libertarianism. The agent-causalist's solution is to specify a way in which the agent could have this further causal role and enhanced control.⁹ The solution is to reintroduce the agent as a cause, this time not merely as involved in events, but rather fundamentally as a substance. If the agent were reintroduced merely as involved in events, the arguments already raised against the adequacy of event-causal libertarianism could be reiterated with undiminished effect. What the agent-causal libertarian posits is an agent who possesses a causal power, fundamentally as a substance, to cause a decision without being causally determined to do so. The proposal is that the control absent on the event-causal libertarian view – control sufficient for moral responsibility -- is supplied by the agent by virtue of having this causal power.

⁸ Derk Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will*, pp. 46-50. Clarke argued for the need for enhanced control in "On the Possibility of Rational Free Action," *Philosophical Studies* 88 (1997), pp. 37-57, and he develops the argument that event-causal libertarianism adds no positive power in *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will*, pp. 105-7.

⁹ Theories of agent causation have recently been advanced by Timothy O'Connor, *Persons and Causes*, and by Randolph Clarke, *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will*, pp. 133-217.

2. Does the luck objection nevertheless succeed against agent-causal libertarianism?

Agent-causal libertarianism, I contend, does not fall to the luck objection.

Recently, Alfred Mele · Carl Ginet, and Ishtayaque Haji have again disputed this contention, on the grounds that the luck objection has as much force against the claim that agent causal libertarianism allows for sufficient control for moral responsibility as it does against the view that event-causal libertarianism allows for this sort of control.¹⁰ In response, it is first of all indisputable that when an agent A agent-causes decision D at t, then an event of the following type occurs:

G: A's causing D at t.

As Mele and Haji emphasize, given exactly the same conditions antecedent to t as those that precede A's agent-causing D, G might not have occurred. So the fact that G did occur would still seem to be a matter of luck. They argue that this provides reason to conclude that making decision D is not sufficiently under the control of the agent. In particular, it still seems that the agent does not settle which option, D or not-D, is realized

The agent-causal libertarian will certainly admit that given these antecedent conditions, G might either have occurred or not. But the core issue is whether the agent nevertheless can have the crucial role in making decision D that she cannot have on the event-causal libertarian's view. It has not been ruled out that she can. What the agent-cause

¹⁰ Alfred Mele, "Libertarianism, Luck, and Control," and *Free Will and Luck*, forthcoming, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Chapter 3; Carl Ginet, advances a similar argument in "Freedom, Responsibility, and Agency," *Journal of Ethics* 1 (1997), pp. 85-98, at p. 91; Ishtiyaque Haji, "Active Control, Agent Causation, and Free Action," *Philosophical Explorations* 7 (2004) pp. 131-148.

does *most fundamentally* is to cause a decision. At this point, one should note that it is a *logical consequence* of the agent's causing a decision that an event of type G occurs. It follows logically from the fact that Grace, now equipped with the agent-causal power, causes the decision to stop that the event *Grace's causing the decision to stop* occurs. But it is *by* agent-causing a decision that the agent brings about the event of type G – as a logical consequence of her causing the decision. What thus explains the occurrence of the event of type G – indeed, given that the antecedent events are in place – is Grace, as a substance, causing the decision. This account differs from the event-causal libertarian's scenario, where, given the role of the antecedent events, the agent plays no further part in determining whether the decision occurs.¹¹

Mele remarks:

Assume that agent causal libertarianism provides agents with a species of control that is not available in compatibilist and event-causal libertarian theories. Even then, it seems to be just a matter of luck that an agent exercised his agent-causal power at t in deciding to A rather than exercising it at t in any of the alternative ways he does in other possible worlds with the same past and laws of nature.¹²

So was Grace's exercise of her agent-causal power merely a matter of luck?¹³ Even though in another world with the same laws of nature and the same past up to the point of Grace's

¹¹ For a further development of this point, see Derk Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will*, pp. 55-9. See also Randolph Clarke, "Agent Causation and the Problem of Luck," pp. 415-6.

¹² Alfred Mele, *Free Will and Luck*, Chapter 3, ms. p. 26.

¹³ See Randolph Clarke, *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will*, p. 203, for a discussion of this move.

decision, she does not decide to stop, her causing this decision to stop is not a matter of luck, because she, as substance, causes this decision at the time it is made, while she does not so cause this decision at the other world. The difference between these two agent-causal worlds is not that antecedent conditions resolve in different ways without the agent's exercising sufficient control over how they resolve, as in the event-causal libertarian scenario. This is the concern that the luck objection highlights, and it is not also a problem for the agent-causal view. Antecedent conditions now resolve the way they do because of Grace's exercising her agent-causal power to cause a decision

3. Is the agent-causalist solution substantive?

However, even if the agent-causalist has provided components designed to allow for moral responsibility that are lacking in the event-causal libertarian's story, one might ask whether the account has provided a genuinely substantive solution to the problem for this alternative position. Mele presses this objection against Clarke's account of agent causation:

"C-control," again, is my name for the power (or ability) Clarke has in mind in his work on a certain power (or ability) to control or determine which actions one performs that cannot be possessed in deterministic worlds. Of course, one may say that he has in mind the power to act freely and morally responsibly. If so, what I want to know is what it is about the power in virtue of which it is a power to do this. Suppose it is said that C-control includes the power to act in such a way that the differences in an agent's exercises of C-control at a time across worlds with the same past and laws of nature are not just a matter of luck, or that it includes the power to act in such a way that even though these differences are just a

matter of luck, one nevertheless acts freely and morally responsibly when properly exercising that power. Then what I want to know is what it is about C-control in virtue of which these claims are supposed to be true.¹⁴

Mele's demand is to the point: the agent-causalist needs to explain what it is about agent causation that yields the requisite control, and this explanation cannot be empty, in the way that simply characterizing it as "the causal power to act freely and morally responsibly" would be. However, the agent-causalist can answer this concern. His explanation is this: to provide the agent with sufficiently enhanced control, a causal power is attributed to her. It is a power of an agent (i) fundamentally as a substance (ii) to cause a decision without being causally determined to do so. An adequate conception of this causal power would have to include additional elements. For example, provision needs to be made that this causal power can be exercised rationally. One way to do this is to build this provision into the causal power itself – one might specify that it is a causal power, fundamentally as a substance, to cause a decision upon consideration of reasons, and on the basis of certain reasons, without being causally determined to do so.¹⁵ In addition, I have argued that it might be advantageous to build into this causal power a capacity to cause a decision of a particular sort at a specific time.¹⁶ It is features (i) and (ii) -- I suspect in accord with the additional elements just listed -- that would supply what the luck objection indicates is lacking in the event-causal libertarian's account. The claim is that the agent's possessing an agent-causal power with these characteristics solves the problem of

¹⁴ Alfred Mele, *Free Will and Luck*, Chapter 3, ms. p. 29.

¹⁵ Clarke does not take this route; *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will*, pp. 144-8.

¹⁶ *Living Without Free Will*, pp. 63-5.

the disappearing agent, and hence supplies the control absent on the event-causal libertarian view. Thus, in response to Mele's concern, the agent-causal libertarian need not resort to an empty characterization of the causal power, but has a substantive response

A further issue related to this concern of Mele's is that when the agent-causal solution to the problems for event-causal libertarianism is proffered, words are being used without a clear sense of what is being said. In particular, the solution involves positing substance-causation, as a different sort from event-causation. But do we have a substantive conception of what substance causation might be so as to differentiate it from event-causation? It is not unnatural to think of substances generally as causes, but such thoughts, more carefully stated, are about events involving those substances, or states or property instances of those substances, as causes. The substance causation at issue is about causation that cannot be more precisely cast in these ways. The concern is that we may not have a conception of substance causation that cannot be reformulated as event-causation. If this is in fact so, then it appears that the agent-causalist is providing only an empty verbal solution.

This concern has two aspects. The first is that our conception of agent causation appears in one sense merely negative. Ordinary speech and thought employ a notion of causation by substances, but it turns out that instances of such causation can generally be recast as causation by events involving the substance. The notion at issue for agent-causation thus appears negative in the following sense: it is substance-causation of a kind that can *not* be recast as causation by events involving that substance. A worry about notions that are negative in this sense is that our cognitive grasp of them tends to be tenuous at best. An example of such a negative notion is that of an immaterial thing. The

fact that our conception seems limited to “a thing that is *not* material” casts at least some doubt on the extent of our cognitive grasp of it. But secondly, if our grasp of the notion of substance-causation at issue is negative in this sense, it would also suffer from a further problem. For our ordinary speech and thought, because it employs a notion of causation by substances, is apt to mislead us into assuming that the notion of substance-causation at issue is instead positive. This in turn might mislead us into thinking that our grasp of the notion at issue is firm, while it is instead tenuous at best. It may even be that we have no understanding of this notion. For it remains open that the only notion of substance-causation that we do understand at all is the one employed in ordinary speech and thought, while the thought that we grasp the notion of a fundamental substance-cause is merely a residue of this ordinary speech and thought.

In what senses might we agents have a conception of ourselves as fundamental substance-causes? Consider several of the dimensions of conceivability outlined by David Chalmers. By Chalmers’s characterization, S is *prima facie* conceivable when S is conceivable on first appearances, and *ideally* conceivable when it is conceivable on ideal rational reflection.¹⁷ S is *negatively* conceivable (in a sense distinct from the one in the previous paragraph) in general when S is not ruled out, and S is negatively conceivable in the central sort of way when S is not ruled out a priori. *Positive* notions of conceivability require that one can form some sort of positive conception of a situation in which S is the

¹⁷ David Chalmers, “Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?”, in *Conceivability and Possibility*, Tamar Szabo Gendler and John Hawthorne, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 145-200, at p. 147.

case.¹⁸ A consequence of my argument so far is that it appears negatively conceivable, for us in our cognitive situation, that we are agent-causes. It seems that we cannot rule out this proposal, either empirically or a priori. It is thus at least *prima facie* negatively conceivable. But this is consistent with its not being ideally negatively conceivable. The key question in responding to the current worry about emptiness concerns whether we can form a positive conception of ourselves as substance-causes. Such a positive conception would provide substantive content to this idea, and this would deflect the claim that the agent-causalist is offering only an empty verbal solution.

It is sometimes claimed that we have significant phenomenological evidence for the broader thesis that we have libertarian free will. Perhaps if we can have free will only if we are agent causes, this evidence not only confirms, but also provides positive content for our conception of ourselves as substance causes. However, the Spinozan response to the claim that we have such phenomenological evidence has not been successfully countered. Spinoza contends that people believe they have “absolute” or libertarian freedom only because they are ignorant of the complete causal account of their actions; “men think themselves free, because they are conscious of their volitions and their appetite, and do not think, even in their dreams, of the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing, because they are ignorant of [those causes].¹⁹ While people generally are aware of their desires and volitions, they are not cognizant of the complete causal account of these desires and volitions. Given that desires and decisions have neural causes, or subconscious

¹⁸ David Chalmers, “Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?” pp. 149-50.

¹⁹ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, Appendix to Part I, II 78; *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and tr. Edwin Curley, Volume 1, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 440.

psychological causes, it is clear that this is correct. The lesson to draw from this observation is that the phenomenology apt to generate a belief that one has libertarian free will would be just as it is if desires and decisions were instead causally determined and we were ignorant of enough of their causes. For this reason, the phenomenological evidence for our having libertarian free will is not especially impressive. This consideration counts strongly against the claim that such evidence provides positive content for a conception of ourselves as fundamental substance-causes.

We will need to look elsewhere. First, it would be helpful to have a sense of exactly what we must conceive in order to form a positive conception of ourselves as substance-causes in a way that does not permit reformulation in terms of our being causes by virtue of involvement in events. Clarke raises the key metaphysical issue for substance-causation in the following passage

the problem arises how, in virtue of standing in this relation to some other property (or properties), the agent-causal property can confer on the substance possessing it, rather than on the event that is the substance's possessing it, a power to cause an effect. If the causal law relates properties, how can the causal relation between particulars that instantiates that causal law relate anything other than exemplifyings of those properties – that is, events – as it does in instantiations of other causal laws? If a substance has a certain causal power in virtue of possessing a property that stands in a certain relation to other properties, how can the exercise of that causal power be anything other than *the substance's possessing that property's* (an event's) standing in the causal relations to an effect, as it is in cases of

the manifestation of causal powers carried by other properties?²⁰

Perhaps it is precisely a common conception of ourselves as agents that provides what Clarke is asking for here. Our self-conception as agents is in part a conception of ourselves as having an executive power to determine which of our motivational states will result in action, and which will not. This conception of the agent has one clear and powerful expression in Stoic theory, and then later in Descartes.²¹ In the Stoic picture, a mature human agent normally has the power to freely and voluntarily assent to, dissent from, or suspend judgment with regard to any proposal for action suggested by its motivational states. Its source is the rational, ruling, part of the soul -- the *hegemonikon*. It is natural to think that what possesses and exercises this executive control is oneself as agent. In the Humean theory, it is solely the states of the self that are causally efficacious in exercising the sort of control at issue. By contrast, in the self-conception of the Stoic theory, no matter what one's motivational states, one can keep oneself from deciding in accord with them. Thus, even if, all things considered, the net force of one's motivational states strongly favors an irrational or immoral proposal for acting, the agent can still dissent from this proposal, and not act on it. In this conception, the agent has an independence of all of its motivational states, and cannot be identified, for example, with the collection of its states.

²⁰ Randolph Clarke, *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will*, p. 192.

²¹ Brad Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 42-101; *Descartes: His Moral Philosophy and Psychology*, tr. John J. Blom (New York: New York University Press, 1978); René Descartes, *Passions of the Soul* (Stephen Voss, ed., Indianapolis: Hackett: 1989); Derk Pereboom, "Stoic Therapy in Descartes and Spinoza," *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (1994), pp. 592-625. The Stoics were determinists, but their conception of the executive agent is separable from their determinism.

Given these specifications, it is not unnatural to identify the agent that exercises this executive control with the agent, fundamentally as substance.

A further feature of the Stoic theory is that in order for a decision to take place, the *hegemonikon* indeed *must* exercise executive control. This idea is intuitive. With only the causal efficacy of the various motivational states in place, we don't yet have a decision. Rather, a decision doesn't come about until the agent makes up her mind and brings it about. Here again, it would seem that what is causing the decision is independent of motivational states, and given this specification, it is not unnatural to identify this cause of with the agent, fundamentally as a substance.²²

The two features of the Stoic position may be a fantasy – it might be, for instance, that the Humean theory is correct instead. In fact, it is not implausible that when it seems to us that we are deciding independently of our motivational states, the decision is actually caused by motivational states that escape our notice. But nevertheless the Stoic picture constitutes a positive conception of the self that, if it is not the ordinary human conception, is at least fairly widespread.²³

²² John Bishop remarks: "Intuitively, we think of agents as carrying out their intentions or acting in accord with their practical reasons, and this seems different from (simply) being caused to behave by those intentions or reasons." (*Natural Agency*, p. 72). He goes on to say that a defender of a causal theory of action (such as himself) must cope with this intuition, I don't have this intuition as strongly for the relation between intention and action conceived as bodily motion as I do for the relation between reasons or motivational states and the forming of an intention, or the making of a decision,

²³ I suspect that we cannot imagine a non-minded substance having this sort of executive independence of its states. Clarke's view is that there is no apparent reason why non-mental substances cannot be causes (*Libertarian Theories of Free Will*, pp. 195-6). I would agree that we have insufficient reason to rule out this proposal absolutely – it can't be ruled out a priori. But it might be that we lack a positive conception that would give it content.

Perhaps, then, the Stoic view provides us with a positive conception of an agent, who, as a substance, has the executive independence from its states to make it the case that it is the substance possessing properties, rather than events that are the substance's possessing of properties at certain times, that is the first *relatum* in a causal relation. It is of course far from obvious that this Stoic picture is accurate, but it is accessible to us – we have a sense for what is meant when it is suggested. From this picture, then, we would gain a positive conception of agent causation, which would provide an answer to the charge that the theory is empty. I suspect, in fact, that the prevalence of the notion of agent-causation has its roots in the pervasiveness of the Stoic picture.

4. Ideal conceivability and ultimate coherence

Returning to Chalmers's classification, the proposal that we are agent-causes – that we have the agent-causal power – is *prima facie* negatively and positively conceivable. However, I think that we do not know whether it is ideally negatively or positively conceivable. On the negative side, it may turn out that fundamental substance-causation is metaphysically impossible, or even conceptually impossible. If it is conceptually impossible, then ideal reasoning would rule it out *a priori*. It follows that it may turn out that ideal reasoning would undermine the positive conception just outlined. For if ideal reasoning were to rule out fundamental substance-causation, then the Stoic conception of ourselves, as substances, having executive independence of our states and causing decisions, would be ruled out. The content that this positive conception supplies may thus be ephemeral, and our conception of ourselves as agent-causes might turn out to be empty after all.

Currently, however, we lack sufficient warrant for this verdict. More generally, we do not now have sufficient reason to conclude that our conception of ourselves as agent-causes is incoherent.²⁴

²⁴ Thanks to Dana Nelkin, Randolph Clarke, and David Christensen for helpful comments and discussion.