

My Brain *Did* Make Me Do It, but Only Because My Mind Did

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Abstract

I state an exclusion problem for free will which purports to show that our actions are not free since they are never caused by our mental states (e.g. our beliefs, desires, intentions, volitions, willings). More specifically, the allegation is that our actions are caused neurologically in such a way as to exclude the possibility of mental causation. The consequences for free will stem from the plausibility of two theses: (i) that agents must be the causal source of their free actions, and (ii) that agents cause their actions to the extent that their mental goings-on cause their actions. By casting doubt on agent causation, the exclusion argument threatens to undermine our firm conviction that we have the capacity to act freely, and with it the conviction that we possess free will. The argument, however, requires the lemma that it would be explanatorily redundant to posit causal relationships between mental events and our actions given the explanations of the latter that are furnished by neurological events. Therein lies the argument's weakness. I challenge this claim of redundancy by offering a theory of the dependence relationships that hold between causal relationships themselves. I show that a proper understanding of these dependence relationships reveals an indispensable role for agents' mental goings-on in explanations of their actions—one that gives mental causation of free acts priority over neurological causation of the same. Neurological causation of action proceeds by way of mental causation of action, so that the former kind of causal relationship is to be explained in terms of the latter. Instead of being an explanatorily idle addition to neurological causation, then, mental causation makes a robust contribution of its own in much the same way as tracing backward along any explanatory chain further enriches an existing explanation. The causal efficacy of agents and their mental lives is thus harmonised with neuroscientific findings, and the threat to free will is parried.