

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar  
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4/4/07  
Mele, *Motivation and Agency*, Chapter 2

- In this chapter Mele defends the view that states such as desires and intentions factor in *causal* explanations of intentional actions.
- Recall Davidson's challenge: How do we make sense of the reasons *for which* someone acted, without thinking of them as the reasons that made a causal contribution to the action? As Mele puts it:

A general version of this question may be framed as follows: in virtue of what is it true that a person acted in pursuit of a particular goal? (39)

- Ginet proposes that all that is required to act for a reason is for that reason (e.g., desire or intention) to accompany the action. See Mele's responses, on p. 40, concerning God and the neuroscientist. Ginet also considers spontaneous actions that are driven by volitions which are not themselves driven by desires or intentions. But is this even coherent? E.g., can I try to do *x* without having any desire or intention driving that attempt?
- Wallace argues that intentions can cause action, but they themselves are not caused by desires or beliefs. But, Mele now raises Davidson's challenge at the level of intentions or decisions.
- Wilson is another noncausalist. For Wilson, the desire for which an agent acts is the desire that the agent performs the action in order to satisfy. But Mele objects:

Our bodily motions might coincide with our desires or intentions, and even result in our getting what we want or what we intend to get (or what we intend our motions to promote), without those motions being *explained* by the desires or intentions. (46)

Here, think of the Martian example (see p. 49 in particular). Furthermore, what is it for an action to be directed by a desire, but without being caused

by it? (48)

Mele makes this larger point:

Partly because teleologists have not offered an acceptable account of what it is to *act*, or to “direct” one’s bodily motions, they have not offered an acceptable account of what it is to act for the sake of a particular goal. (51)

- Actions, like dollar bills and sunburns, essentially have certain historical properties.

- Mele then turns to the problem of deviant causal chains. Beliefs, desires, intentions, etc. must cause their actions *in the right kind of way*. But this “right way” has been very hard to articulate. Mele handles this problem by considering, in imagination, how agents are or can be constructed. See the myth of Epimetheus and Prometheus, as presented on pp. 54–56. Note, in particular, the connection between proximal intentions and *PMC*.

Prometheus designed human agents in such a way that their “directing” their ongoing bodily motions required persisting intentions to play a guiding role. No other way of endowing them with self-direction occurred to him. (56)

*CA* can explain, for example, why Daphne raised her hand in order to touch the pear. (58)

- Mele then offers 4 possible explanations as to why the climber in Davidson’s example (see pp. 52–53) failed to perform an action (or do what he did in order to fulfill his desire). (59–60)