

REVIEWS

Irving Thalburg, *Enigmas of Agency*, (George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1972)

This book makes a rewarding reading. Its subject is the nature of human agency or action. As the title of the book suggests, it is concerned with 'some puzzling facets of human agency and its social setting'. It embodies 'a fairly constant work over a decade of problems in these areas'. But no claim is made here to have executed 'a big picture' or to have given a 'theory of action'. "Alongside the specific results I get in the studies, what I mainly see are tendencies, various polemical temptations, which should all be too evident; and pervasive influences". Despite this clearly modest statement, the author has, in my opinion, made substantial progress in clarifying the issues and advancing the debate at least a step towards some solution of the problems involved.

The book divides into eleven essays, earlier versions of which were published in various journals, plus an introduction. But it is not just a collection of essays; it is written to be read as a single book dealing with various riddles about the nature of human action. 'Introductory Remarks' tell us what to expect from the succeeding essays in the book. The book deals with 'seven overlapping groups of current problems about action' called 'problem areas'. They are :

- " (1) Causal explanation of what people do.
- (2) The nature of action, as contrasted with bodily processes, things that happen to a person, and events of the inanimate world.
- (3) The awareness which people have regarding their current behaviour.

- (4) The *control* agents have over what they do, the power they have to act or not, as they choose.
- (5) Choice itself, and kindred phenomena, such as desires and reasons for acting, which were traditionally regarded as functions of the will.
- (6) The concept of freedom, as it is applied to the actions and perhaps also to the will of an individual.
- (7) The connection between what people believe or know they *ought* to do and their eventual conduct."

The essays develop a continuous discussion in these various problem areas, making explicit their mutual implications. In the course of the discussion, the author opens up new and fresh lines of arguments and enquiry especially where he finds that the ground is traversed and retraversed by philosophers without taking the confusions any nearer to solutions. He has many illuminating things to say where he finds other philosophers to have taken certain concept as understood e.g. the concept what is it to do something and the control-concept, trying. About this more anon.

Causal explanations of what people do have loomed large in the history of philosophy and the contemporary discussions. Causal concepts have been used mainly to distinguish between the events which are actions and the events which can be described as what people undergo. Some philosophers are interested in the causal concepts because they can give the most plausible account of human action. Thalberg brings out the prominent drawbacks of this position by step by step analysis of what is involved in the causal account of human agency. He shows that causal notions cannot help us to mark off deeds as the events we caused. "Causal notions are unservicable to us when we analyse what it is to act and to have something happen to us." Causal concepts may be useful, say, in fixing responsibility. But we cannot discover a mark of action in the events which are human actions. As a tool of analysis for analysing

the relation between the various elements of action, such as, desire, belief, decision and control, the causal concepts are totally inadequate.

Causal concepts have been used to distinguish between the events which are actions and the events which can be described as what people undergo. So the actions are the events which the agent causes to happen; the events which the agent does not cause to happen are the events that befall him. The distinction that results between what the agent does and what he undergoes it taken to be both exhaustive and exclusive. The underlying assumption that the human actions are events with definite discernible causal characteristics is challenged by Thalberg. Proper analysis of human action must take into account the fact that they are 'attempts to reach goals', 'attempts that reveal desires and decisions'. 'The distinctive trait of action', says Thalberg, 'is revealed by terms we use to connect a person's deeds with his will—that is, with his desires, aims, decisions, intentions, effort and conative attitudes'. 'All clear instances of action can be described in these terms'. Moreover, the intentional actions of the agent are under his control. The concept of control over the action seems to lend plausibility to the distinction between doing and undergoing, in terms of causal concept because the agent seems to have control over the events he causes to happen and to lack control over events he does not or cannot cause to happen. Also, this makes the distinction between doing and undergoing look exhaustive and exclusive. Yet the distinction is unclear and Thalberg challenges it. Since a mark of action is indiscernible in the events themselves which are human actions, he proposes 'quasi-linguistic criterion for distinguishing verbs of action from verbs and verb phrases of undergoing'. He also offers 'a separate non-linguistic mark of undergoing'. So verbs of action 'may be modified by terms for control and loss of control, without the sentence in which they appear becoming either self-contradictory or unintelligible.' But 'when verbs and verb

phrases of undergoing consort with control and loss of control terms, the combination is unintelligible'. This criterion is quasi-linguistic because it appeals to non-grammatical notion of control. So 'hiting' can be described as 'deliberate' or 'unintentional'. But 'being hit' cannot be described as 'deliberate' or 'unintentional'. The non-linguistic criterion of undergoing is that 'the man who undergoes something must be acted upon'. That is, when a person undergoes something either (1) another agent does something to him, or (2) some natural force acts upon him, or (3) the agent acts upon himself in such a way that something happens to him. By consistent application of these criteria, Thalberg shows that the expressions describing events do not slip neatly into the compartments of 'doing,' and 'undergoing'. In the course of his investigations Thalberg has stumbled upon three different families of verbs that appear to elude both the categories of doing and undergoing. These three families of verbs are :

- (a) 'bodily process verbs' such as 'bleed', 'perspire', 'throb';
- (b) 'reaction verbs' such as 'shudder', 'blush', 'choke', and
- (c) 'breakdown verbs' such as 'fumble', 'stammer', 'trip', 'sleep', 'faint', 'overlook', 'fail'.

The verbs in these three groups fall outside the categories of doing and undergoing. So the distinction between doing and undergoing is not exhaustive nor exclusive. This becomes evident as a result of his analysis of 'breakdown verbs'. Unlike bodily process verbs and reaction verbs, breakdown verbs resist any attempt to qualify them as either expressing 'doing' or 'undergoing'. Even in the case of bodily process verbs and reaction verbs such qualification is possible only under imaginary and logically possible conditions.

This discussion underlines the essential inadequacy of causal explanation of human action. Also, in the discussion, control emerges as the basic characteristic of human action. Moreover, some minimal degree of awareness is involved because we deliberate and decide beforehand about our important actions. This consists with our legal and everyday concept of action which make some form of awareness and intention integral elements of human agency.

The inadequacy of the causal explanation of human agency is due to this : Causal relations are matters of fact, discoverable through observation and experiment. Thus, until neurophysiology or some other science can discover how in detail our actions follow from our beliefs, desires, intention or whatever we call is the reason for our action, merely to say that our actions are caused by them leads us no further. Still, causal explanations are a kind of standard form of explanation and to this extent human behaviour is amenable to causal explanation, in that, many of our actions result from our motives and desires. But "there are further things worth saying about a man's reasons for acting, which render his action more intelligible than it was". So non-causal explanations of human behaviour are quite in order, which cannot be replaced by causal explanations. Non-causal explanation which Thalberg outlines is called "essential explanation". He says, "An agent's reasons for acting occupy a unique position in our scheme". These reasons "identify the event he participated in as his action" and "also identify it as the specific sort of action it was". Thalberg does not maintain any 'thoroughgoing incompatibility' between causal explanation and the essential explanation of human behaviour. He says, "during a non-causal explanation of someone's deeds, the reasons, desires or motives that come into the picture" could be causal factors. But 'the agent may not know the cause of his action as this cause would be specified in a scientist's account of the

deed'. And 'an agent's knowledge of his reason is not inductive or observational'. An agent's description of these causal factors may differ from the description of them in a relevant causal law. The agent's description of his reasons are mainly in the form of his purposes and desires. Thalberg's discussion is here reminiscent of Plato's contrast between mechanical and teleological explanations and I feel he has taken it further in that he has tried to make explicit various aspects of positions involved in the dispute. Similarly his claim to reconcile the disputants is amply justified.

Since human actions are attempts, successful or otherwise, to reach goals, analysis of attempts or what one is trying to do has much to tell us about human agency. In this respect Thalberg distinguishes four kinds of trying; exertion, causal, initiatory and procedural trying. Little attention has been paid by others to this control concept and thus his analysis helps to bring to light various aspects of human agency. Interesting conclusions emerge from this; that trying to perform some task implies something that obstructs you. So exertion, the least interesting species, demands an obstacle. In general, any attempt is an activity, 'that could fall short of what you attempt to do'. So, trying would be impossible where the attempt and the action itself would be indistinguishable. Causal, initiatory and procedural attempts imply some doubt that you will succeed. Also trying requires appropriate circumstances, such as, rules, minimal capacities and the instruments. All species of trying presuppose logical possibility that you do what you attempt to do. Most philosophers have taken trying as trouble-free concept but Thalberg throws new lights on the problems involved. His examination of attempting has all the airs of breaking new grounds.

Similar is the position in his examination of 'free-will' problems connected with the nature of human agency. Here he is searching 'for some intelligible kind of freedom on volitional

level', and he succeeds in finding 'a limited sense for freedom concepts on volitional level'. He analyses the conditions for acting freely and deciding freely and finds that 'the conditions necessary for freedom of will are a limited sub-set of the optimum conditions for exercising our abilities and rights to act, and for exploiting our opportunities to perform various deeds.' That is, "when circumstances give an agent liberty of action, they always ensure whatever liberty there might be for his will." "Agents and their actions take primacy over the wills and decisions of agents, within any cogent theory of human freedom". The reasons for this are obvious. We feel concerned about people's decisions because of their conduct that follows from them. And if a person has no freedom of action, our concern for freedom of his will has no meaning.

For reasons of convenience I am skipping much of his interesting and instructive discussions about other elements involved in the proper understanding of human action, such elements as intention, power or ability, predictions of future decision, an agent's peculiar knowledge of his own deeds. Also I am constrained to omit his illuminating "exegesis and defence" of J. L. Austin's "Ifs and Cans" and his incisive criticism of a 'persistent theme in H. A. L. Hart's writings about responsibility and states of mind'. Instead, I prefer to turn to the last essay which deals with 'reasons we have for what we do' from a different angle. This last essay is 'Socratic Paradox and Remorse'.

Here, as in his earlier essays, Thalberg prefers not to plunge into 'perennial issue' concerning our beliefs about what we do. Instead, he prefers to grapple with an enigma appropriate for this series of essays. One of the grounds for our action is our belief that 'it is the best course of action'. So the paradox that interests him is this; if you really know what is the best course of action **for yourself**, then you will necessarily pursue it or attempt to **pursue** it, when you find suitable opportunity.

This is the famous Socratic paradox, namely, that no one does wrong knowing it to be wrong. It is part of the broader view that virtue is knowledge. Thalberg here focuses "exclusively on a logical consequence of the doctrine that having reasons entails action". So if I know what is the best course of action, then I pursue that course of action. Therefore, if I do not pursue it, then I really do not know that it was the best course of action. My failure to act is the criterion that I did not know.

This seems to go against the ordinary view that people on occasions fail to do what they believe or know they ought to do. To accommodate this, the entailment from belief to action must be denied. Otherwise the agent's failure to act will entail that he did not believe he should act. So Hare and Nowell Smith look for other criterion, besides conformity, for ascribing moral beliefs to a man who failed to act in conformity with his beliefs. Hare finds this criterion in the remorse that an agent feels when he fails to act in conformity with his beliefs. But Thalberg shows that 'the remorse criterion is not consistent with a denial of Socratic view'. This would only entail a version of Socratic paradox. The feeling of remorse is 'at most necessarily followed by such activities as making amends'. So a proper analysis of remorse shows that Hare and Nowell Smith cannot escape Socratic paradox.

The book is engrossing. In dealing with the various problems, he was obviously "struggling with each knot", as it turned up. It is written in non-technical language for an intelligent and inquisitive general reader to understand. Nor does the author expect much expert knowledge on his reader's part. The book is an excellent example of philosophical analysis.

There are four misprints : 'needs' for 'deeds' (page 49); 'be' for 'we' (page 60); 'is' for 'it' (page 61) and 'or' for 'of' (page 86).

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