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INTENTIONAL ACTION AND WAYWARD CAUSAL CHAINS:  
THE PROBLEM OF TERTIARY WAYWARDNESS

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Recent years have seen a number of instructive attempts to resolve the problems that the possibility of wayward causal chains poses for causal analyses of intentional action.<sup>1</sup> According to the analyses in question, an action's being intentional is a function of its causation by psychological items — e.g., want/belief pairs, intentions, or volitions. The problem, or so it has seemed to some, is that whatever psychological causes are deemed both necessary and sufficient for a resultant action's being intentional, cases can be described in which, due to a deviant causal connection between the favored psychological antecedents and a pertinent action to which they lead, that action is not intentional.<sup>2</sup>

In [1], Myles Brand helpfully divides the examples of waywardness that abound in the literature into two types, depending upon what portion of the causal chain is singled out for attention (p. 18). Some cases focus on behavioral consequences of actions that are more directly generated by antecedent mental events, and on the connection between these actions and their consequences. These examples pose what Brand terms the problem of *consequential waywardness*. Other cases raise a problem about a more direct connection between mental antecedents and resultant behavior — the problem of *antecedential waywardness*. The following are, respectively, representative instances of the two types of example:

A man may try to kill someone by shooting at him. Suppose the killer misses his victim by a mile, but the shot stampedes a herd of wild pigs that trample the intended victim to death. ([3], pp. 152f.)

[A] chemist who is working with cyanide near his colleague's cup of tea may desire to kill his colleague and believe that he can do this by dropping some cyanide into the tea... [T]his desire and belief may so upset him that his hands shake, with the result that he drops some of the poisonous substance into the tea. ([6], p. 346)

I believe that both problems have been resolved.<sup>3</sup> However, a *third* variety of waywardness has gone unnoticed. I shall show that it raises a further problem for causal analyses of intentional action — a problem that is not resolved by

the successful attempts in the literature to meet the challenge posed by consequential and antecedential waywardness. Indeed, as I explain in Section I, the instance of waywardness discussed there falsifies a very promising causal analysis of intentional action that has grown out of such an attempt. I conclude, not that the causal project must be scrapped, but rather that more must be done if causal analyses of intentional action are to escape the difficulties posed by wayward causal chains.

### I

Consider the following case:

Fred is taking a machine-readable multiple choice test. His strategy is to circle on the question-sheet the identifying letters next to the answers that he feels certain are correct and then, after all such circling is completed, to fill in the corresponding spaces on his answer sheet. At this point, he will take up the more difficult questions.

An hour has elapsed, and Fred is reading the forty-fifth question. He is confident that the answer is 'bee', which word appears next to the letter 'a' on his question sheet. However, as a result of an understandable slip of the pencil, he circles the letter 'b'. As luck would have it, 'b' is the correct answer. Later, when filling in the answer sheet, Fred looks at the circled 'b' under question 45 and fills in the space under 'b' on his answer sheet — intending thereby to provide the right answer.

Fred intends to provide the correct answer by filling in the space under 'b' and he does provide the correct answer by filling in this space. Moreover, his intention is a cause of his behavior. Nevertheless, it seems clear that Fred's providing the correct answer is *not* an *intentional* action. It is just too accidental.

In the present section, I shall establish two points. First, the case of Fred constitutes a decisive counterexample against an otherwise attractive causal analysis of intentional action — an analysis designed to handle the problems of consequential and antecedential waywardness. Second, there is a species of causal waywardness in the example, but it is neither consequential nor antecedential, in Brand's sense of these terms.

The causal analysis on which I shall focus is advanced by Brand in the first chapter of [1]. I select this analysis for two reasons. It seems to me

to avoid the more familiar problems of waywardness and it is the most detailed and promising causal analysis of intentional action that I have seen.<sup>4</sup> Brand's complete analysis would take the better part of a page to reproduce. For our purposes it is necessary to consider only the following sufficient condition:

*S*'s *A*ing during *t* is an intentional action [if] (i) *S*'s *A*ing during *t* is an action; and (ii) ... *S* has an action plan *P* to *A* during *t* such that his *A*ing is included in *P* and he follows *P* in *A*ing. ... (p. 28)

(Causation enters here via Brand's notion of following a plan.)<sup>5</sup>

Fred's providing the correct answer (his *A*ing) satisfies both (i) and (ii). It is an action. And, in *A*ing, Fred follows an action-plan to *A* that includes his *A*ing. I shall suppose that his plan is quite simple, viz., to provide the correct answer by filling in the blank under 'b' on the answer-sheet. To be sure, the etiology of Fred's *A*ing does not fit the more complex plan with which he started the test; for that plan includes circling only letters that identify what he takes to be the correct answer. But his *A*ing does fit the plan that he has *vis-à-vis* the answering of question 45 — i.e., the simple plan that I identified.

Now, one can reconstruct the example in such a way that Fred's plan regarding the answering of question 45 is more complex or detailed than the one that I attributed to him, with the result that he does *not* follow his plan for providing the correct answer to that question. For example, one might suppose that Fred's plan is the following: to translate into the correct response on the answer-sheet his circling of the letter that *in fact identifies* his favored prose answer to question 45, and to do this by filling in the space under 'b' on the answer-sheet. In that event Fred's behavior would *not* constitute a counterexample to Brand's analysis; for in producing the correct answer, Fred would not have followed his plan for doing so. However, there is no need to suppose that the plan just mentioned, nor any other unfollowed plan, was Fred's actual plan at the time at which he *A*ed. It is surely *possible* that he had, and was following, the simple plan that I attributed to him. And since this *is* possible, I shall suppose that it is precisely what happened.

The upshot, of course, is that Brand's statement of sufficient conditions of an *A*ing's being an intentional action is false. Though Fred's providing the correct answer satisfies (i) and (ii), it is not an intentional action. It is

no more intentional than is a student's providing the correct answer to a particular question when, in a mad dash to complete his test, he arbitrarily fills in the space that he does.

I turn now to my second point. The problem posed by the case of Fred, as I have said, is not one of consequential nor antecedential waywardness. There is nothing deviant about the connection between Fred's intentionally filling in the space under 'b' on the answer-sheet and his providing the correct answer. This is a straightforward instance of non-causal level-generation.<sup>6</sup> Nor is there anything wayward about the causal connection between Fred's intention to provide the correct answer by filling in the space under 'b' on the answer-sheet and his providing the correct answer by filling in the space. This portion of the etiology of Fred's behavior proceeds quite normally.

Nevertheless, the example of Fred does involve a wayward causal chain. Things go awry prior to his forming (or acquiring) the here-and-now intention to provide the correct answer by filling in the space under 'b' on the answer-sheet. The basic deviance is in the etiology of Fred's circling the letter 'b' on the *question*-sheet. For lack of a better name, I shall call the waywardness exhibited in the case of Fred *tertiary* waywardness.

## II

Recent attempts by Brand, Searle, and Thalberg<sup>7</sup> to meet the standard problem of causal waywardness share four features. First, these philosophers rightly observe both that a necessary condition of an *Aing*'s being an intentional action is that it be an *action* and that in many cases of waywardness the pertinent item seems not to be an action. For example, the chemist's "dropping" some cyanide is more aptly described as the poison's falling from his trembling hands. Second, they attempt to eliminate any possible gap between the agent's action and its pertinent psychological causes. That is, they maintain that an adequate causal analysis of intentional action will exclude such a gap.<sup>8</sup> Third, they give intention a guiding function in the development of intentional action. Fourth, they argue that an action's being intentional depends upon its fitting, roughly, the agent's conception or (re)presentation of the manner in which it will be performed.

It is worth noting that Fred's providing the correct answer – his *Aing* – does not run afoul of any of these provisos. It is an action. If (non-basic) actions have proximate psychological causes, there is no reason to think that

Fred's *Aing* does not. And his *Aing* is guided by his here-and-now intention to do so and fits the plan that he has for that action — namely, that he will provide the correct answer by filling in the space under the letter 'b' on the answer-sheet.

It should also be observed that the case of Fred is not the sort of example that brings us to "the limits of our ordinary concept of intentional action" ([1], p. 30) and therefore generates conflicting intuitions. Our intuitions about this case are quite clear. Fred's providing the correct answer is a non-intentional action.

Should we conclude that causal analyses of intentional action are doomed to failure? No; this would be much too hasty. Chisholm's initial formulation of the problem of wayward causal chains (in [2]) antedates the resolutions of Brand and company by some twenty years. One would hope that the problem of tertiary waywardness will be resolved more expeditiously. This, however, is a topic for another day.<sup>9</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See [1], Ch. 1; [7], Chs. 3 and 4; [8].

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., [2], pp. 615ff. Cf. [4], p. 157, on causal analyses of action.

Notice that a bit of behavior may fail to be an intentional action for either of two general reasons. It may not be an action at all. Or, though it is an action, it may not be intentional. Causal accounts of what it is for an action to be intentional cannot be falsified by waywardly caused non-actions. However, philosophers have not always been careful to distinguish actions from non-actions in this connection. (Thalberg emphasizes this point in [8].)

<sup>3</sup> See, esp., [1], pp. 19–30; [7], pp. 107–111, 135–140; [8].

<sup>4</sup> Brand offers a naturalized version of the analysis in [1], Ch. 8.

<sup>5</sup> See [1], p. 25 and Ch. 9.

<sup>6</sup> See [5], pp. 20–44.

<sup>7</sup> See references in Note 3.

<sup>8</sup> Brand argues that all actions, whether intentional or otherwise, have a proximate mental cause ([1], pp. 19–23).

<sup>9</sup> This paper was written during my tenure of a 1985/86 NEH Fellowship for College Teachers.

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