

Helen Steward

A Metaphysics for Freedom.

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Anyone familiar with Helen Steward's work knows that she is not afraid of assuming the role of the iconoclast, challenging a number of orthodoxies in the metaphysics of mind and action. She does so in a way that one cannot help but admire, even if one strongly disagrees with her.

A better title for Steward's book would have been *A Metaphysics for Agency*. This book is no less provocative than her earlier work. A Steward's central claim is that the exercise of agency in acting is incompatible with determinism. This is the case because in performing some action *A*, an agent settles whether *A* will or will not be the case. In a deterministic universe, while an agent may cause *A*, she does not settle whether *A*. And it is this power to settle matters in acting that we lose in a deterministic universe according to Steward. Hence, she indicates that she is concerned with defending "agency incompatibilism" and not just incompatibilism about free will.

While the agency of humans is the main focus of the book, Steward argues that the agency of any self-moving animals is threatened by determinism. She argues that, because animals exercise agency, determinism is not true. In a footnote, she makes it clear that, while her reasoning may not constitute a proof of indeterminism, "it is a very good reason for believing in it" (6, n. 15).

Fairly early on, Steward goes on the offensive, targeting the causal theory of action (CTA). She singles out the CTA as being a compatibilist theory of agency. In her critique of the CTA, Steward focuses on two long-standing problems for the CTA, the problem of causal deviance and the problem of the absent agent. Her line of critique largely echoes the standard strategy articulated by opponents of the CTA. Where her argument becomes most interesting is when she asserts that much of our purposive activity that counts as an exercise of agency is not preceded by the sorts of rationalizing mental causes that are typically included in the causal story articulated by defenders of the CTA. She may be right about this. But this does not obviously show that the CTA is false. Some of the examples she uses are too fine-grained. For instance, Steward and the defender of the CTA will agree that my typing the letter "r" just a moment ago was an intentional action. Did I have an intention to type the letter "r"? It is not obvious that I did. Defenders of the CTA who reject the simple view of intentional action will say that typing the letter "r" was intentional because it lay within the motivational potential of an intention. In this case, I have an intention to type. And the persisting intention is the means whereby I causally guide the activity of my fingers. Steward seems to be assuming that causalists must endorse the simple view of intentional action (which states that, for any intentional action *A*, an agent had an intention to *A*). Also, she seems to assume that causalists must endorse theories of causation that make causes temporally precede their effects. But there are models of causation the CTA proponent can endorse that make room for synchronic causal relations, with causes and effects occurring simultaneously. So even if Steward is right about some actions not being

causally preceded by some rationalizing mental items, it is not obvious that these actions lack rationalizing mental causes.

Steward next takes aim at what she labels the “Epistemological Argument.” Roughly, the Epistemological Argument asserts that whether determinism is true or not is a matter that will be settled by physics. According to this line of argument, we simply know that there are agents and that there are actions they perform: our knowledge about these matters is not affected by the truth or falsity of any relevant discoveries by physicists. However, whether we exercise *free* agency might be affected by some such discovery. Steward argues that this line of reasoning relies on some ambiguity between the claim that *only* physics can answer the question whether determinism is true and the claim that physics *may* one day settle the question whether or not determinism is true. Endorsing the former claim begs the question against agency incompatibilism, according to Steward (117). The latter claim, Steward claims, even if conceded, is not sufficient to sustain the Epistemological Argument. Not surprisingly, she focuses on refuting the former claim.

Two chapters are devoted to responding to problems raised by the intelligibility question, which asks “whether we can make sense of a freedom that is incompatible with determinism” (125). Again, Steward’s focus is simply on agency and not on free agency. She argues that “All that is necessary, so far as the alternate possibilities required for agency are concerned, is that the agent’s *actual* action be a non-compulsory exercise of power on his part” (195). So, while an agent must possess a “*relevant refrainment power*” when acting, robust alternate possibilities are not required for genuine agency.

Perhaps the most metaphysically ambitious part of the book is the final chapter. In it, Steward attempts to provide an account of agent-causation that can avoid the charge of metaphysical unintelligibility so often leveled against agent-causalism. She also tries to show how such agency can be consistent with the picture of the world provided by the natural sciences. With respect to the first task, Steward argues that actions are themselves exercises of agent-causal power and not products of such exercises (200). Also, agent-causation is ubiquitous, found among all agents, not just human agents, and the exercise of agent-causal power is constitutive of all actions, not just free decisions.

As part of her defense of agent-causation, Steward defends top-down causation. She assumes an ontology of levels of being in order to make sense of how an “animal has any real, independent efficacy *of its own*... that does not merely reduce to the efficacy of its various parts” (227). Agents, such as humans, have the power to affect processes at the neural level on the picture she proffers. The metaphysics of mind and the broader ontological picture Steward assumes is quite controversial and she devotes much of this section to addressing some standard objections.

While I agree with few of Steward’s assumptions and conclusions, I strongly recommend this book to those working on agency today. It is exactly what those familiar with Steward’s work on agency will expect: a well-argued, innovative, and clearly written defense of an unconventional theory of agency. It deserves the attention of researchers working on agency,

including both those primarily interested in foundational issues in action theory and those primarily interested in the metaphysics of free will.

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