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Springs of Action: Understanding Intentional Behavior by Alfred R. Mele

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I offer one-liners about some others. Three discuss equality either in general (Rachels and Miller) or regarding provision of health care (Norman Daniels). Both depart from Nielsen's ultraegalitarian pronouncements, but all seem to accept a general principle of equality in the provision of "opportunities" or at least of "basic" health care—but do no better than Nielsen in offering any actual *support* for any such principle. Richard Miller ("Justice as Social Freedom") explores the "supposed" opposition of freedom and equality by accepting a "minimal specification centering on a demand for equality of opportunity, which every partisan of social freedom would accept on adequate reflection" (p. 38). Not surprisingly, he "finds" that freedom, far from conflicting with equality, presupposes a large measure of it—it is easy to overcome oppositions if you redefine one of the opposed members in terms of the other! Robert Ware ("Marx on Some Phases of Communism") does some really useful service in analyzing Marx's actual pronouncements about the way things are supposed to go after capitalism—making it clear to this reader why nobody should want to "advance" to any of those phases in the first place. Braybrooke finds that Marx has both of his concepts of needs, and says some useful things about both.

Terence Penelhum discusses the *Euthyphro* result on religion and ethics—an area where Nielsen seems to me entirely in the right. Penelhum tries to show that nevertheless acceptance of Christianity would or should make *some* difference to the content of morality. I am not convinced, but a sentence is not enough to say why. And C. B. Martin does a beautiful job dissecting some of the currently fashionable trends in metaphysics and epistemology with which Nielsen has lately come to sympathize, notably some sort of conceptual relativism and antirealism. And I found Marsha Hanen's quasi-feminist metaphilosophical essay impenetrable.

There is food for thought in these papers, even if the volume is not quite in the class of things you've just got to rush out and buy.

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Mele, Alfred R. *Springs of Action: Understanding Intentional Behavior*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. Pp. ix + 272. \$39.95 (cloth).

Mele's main project is to give a causal account of human action that is sensitive to the variety of ways in which such action may come about. Chapter 2 argues that his sort of "causalist" account (according to which all action has an intentional component that reflects the reasons for which the action is performed and by which the action is caused) is compatible with "physicalism" (the view that every substance, event, or state of affairs is, or supervenes on, a physical substance, event, or state of affairs). Chapter 3 discusses the principle (held by Donald Davidson to be self-evident) that, if an agent wants to do x more than he wants to do y and he believes himself free to do either x or y , then he will intentionally do x if he does either x or y intentionally. Mele criticizes this principle but then proposes a complicated modification of it. This modified

principle may suggest that preponderant motivation to do x is irresistible, but Mele denies this, noting that such motivation would be irresistible only if we lacked control over the strengths of our desires and claiming that we frequently have such control. Chapter 4 discusses this point, and chapter 5 provides an analysis of what it is for a desire to be irresistible. Chapter 6 discusses Davidson's claim that an action is intentional only if it is done for a reason consisting of a want/belief pair such that the belief identifies the action as conducive to the achievement of the wanted item. Mele criticizes this claim, on the grounds that it fails to accommodate actions that are done entirely for their own sake, and then proposes a modification of it.

The foregoing constitutes part 1 of the book. Part 2 focuses on the role of intention in particular in the etiology of action. Mele contends that proximal intentions (intentions to act here and now) play a crucial role in the causation of action by mediating between reasons and actions. Chapter 7 notes that intending to act in a certain way does not require being preponderantly motivated to act in that way. (One's evaluative judgments may be at odds with one's desires—a theme central to Mele's earlier book, *Irrationality* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1987], which focuses on *akrasia*—and one's intentions may reflect the former rather than the latter.) Chapter 8 addresses the following argument: one intends to do x only if one believes that one will (probably) do x ; one does x intentionally only if one intended to do x ; hence, one does x intentionally only if one believed that one would (probably) do x . Mele rejects the conclusion; he favors retaining a variant of the first premise while rejecting the second. Chapter 9 attacks the view that intentions are reducible to belief/desire complexes. In particular, it is noted that intentions have an executive dimension that involves settling (not necessarily irrevocably) on a certain course of action aimed at bringing the world into conformity with one's plans. Chapter 10 discusses and endorses a principle (very roughly, the converse of that endorsed in chap. 3) to the effect that, if one does x intentionally, then one is more motivated to do x than to do any competing action. (Mele appears to regard this principle and its converse—both suitably qualified—to be conceptual truths.) This chapter also argues against John Searle's claim that intentional action essentially involves "intention in action" rather than "prior intention." Chapter 11 attacks the thesis, endorsed by Searle, Gilbert Harman, and others, that the content of an intention must make reference to itself. Chapter 12 discusses the variety of ways in which intentions may be acquired. And chapter 13 criticizes two recent arguments against a causalist approach to the explanation of action.

Throughout this book Mele is flexible and undogmatic, giving a full and sensitive hearing to rival views. The discussion is extremely detailed. He uses the work of several prominent philosophers as foils, and the frequent references to the work of others are both apt and helpful. In addition, he shows himself to be at home with the pertinent psychological literature.

There is space for only three brief and highly selective observations.

First, it seems clear that Mele implicitly favors compatibilism. He does not shrink from talk of the causation (by events or states) of action coupled with talk of the agent's control over his actions. Nonetheless, an incompatibilist could accept a great deal of what Mele says. There is in general no need for an incompatibilist to deny that action can be caused, even when causation is

understood to be deterministic (involving sufficient causal conditions) rather than merely probabilistic. It is only free action—action over which the agent exercises control—that the incompatibilist takes to be inconsistent with uninterrupted causation, and even here there is plenty of room for causation to operate, both prior to action (e.g., with respect to the acquisition of beliefs, desires, and intentions) and subsequent to action (e.g., with respect to the consequences of the action or with respect to that which is level-generated by the action). Somewhere, of course, there must be a break in the causal chain, a break which would seem not to allow for the sort of unqualifiedly causal explanation of action that Mele favors. Still, depending on the exact nature of the incompatibilist account, much of Mele's account might be retained.

Second, Mele's adherence to the principle (only roughly stated here) that one does x intentionally only if one is preponderantly motivated to do x seems to be what commits him to saying that the only way to exercise control over whether one does x is by exercising control over the strength of one's motivation to do x . But while this is surely one way in which to exercise control, another and perhaps more common way would appear to be this: one doesn't control the strength of one's motivation, but one controls one's susceptibility to it. Consider an analogy. Sam can control whether or not he is swept away by a flood of water either by controlling the (source of the) flood or by swimming so as to counteract its force. Only in the former case does Sam affect the strength of the force that moves, or may move, him.

Finally, while Mele holds that all intentional action involves the intention to act, he denies, as noted above, the view that one does x intentionally only if one intended to do x . He prefers to retain a variant of the view that one intends to do x only if one believes that one will (probably) do x . But there is reason to take the opposite tack. The difference between merely hoping to do x and intending to do x would seem to rest not in the degree to which one takes it to be probable that one will do x but in whether or not one has a plan to see one's project through. One cannot (normally) intentionally roll a six with a die in part because one cannot (normally) intend to do this, and one cannot (normally) intend to do it because one can (normally) have no plan as to how, beyond the initial throw, to see one's project of doing so through. One can, however, intentionally shoot a target, even if one believes one's chance of success is one in six (or less) because one can intend to do so, and one can intend to do so because one can have a plan that involves seeing one's project through (adjusting one's aim, etc.) in order to maximize one's chance of success.

The foregoing barely scratches the surface of this rich and subtle book. It is a very impressive and provocative piece of work. It is difficult, but important, and deserves widespread attention.

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