

PREFACE

The text before you is a study of the problematic issue of mental causation: causation by minds. On hearing the expression 'mental causation,' you may at first think of something like bending spoons by 'psychic' powers. But no, we are dealing here with something much more puzzling: doing things for reasons, i.e., what we call agency. Psychic spoon-bending would be a fairly straightforward issue. You just exert some psychic force and bend a spoon, just like you might bend it by hand, i.e., by physical force. The only trouble here is that psychic forces may not be in fact available. But now you fetch an umbrella because you expect that it will rain. How does *that* work? Somehow, it seems, you let an expectation move your limbs. But aren't your limbs already moved by nerve impulses and muscle contractions? And are expectations the proper kind of items to move things around?

Mental causation is an issue that is at the heart of the mind-body problem, the problem of making it clear how minded creatures such as we are possible, and what our mindedness consists in. Unlike psychic spoon-bending, mental causation happens every day. At least, pretty much of what we take for granted about ourselves can only be right when mental causation really happens. If we came to deny the reality of mental causation, we would invalidate core notions about our existence as perceiving, thinking and acting subjects. The concept of knowledge, for instance, and related notions such as perception, rationality, science, thought and communication, seem to rely for their very intelligibility on the reality of mental causation. The same holds true of the concept of agency, with its related notions of will, freedom, autonomy, and responsibility.

This is why entire philosophical disciplines, such as epistemology, ethics, and philosophy of science, presuppose the reality of mental causation. And mental causation does not just concern philosophy: psychology, history, and a range of social sciences also presuppose mental causation. Neither is the importance of mental causation confined to the studies of academics: any form of jurisdiction, with its use of notions like intent, responsibility, and accountability, would be impossible if the reality of mental causation were not presupposed. When advertizing agencies, political parties, religious organizations and schools spend their efforts, as well as considerable sums of money, on changing our behaviour by changing our minds, they also manifest a great belief in mental causation. And so do all of us, any time we consider it worthwhile to speak to each other, or to deliberate before we act.

Bad news, then, and a great embarrassment, to learn about this important phenomenon that in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind we do not seem able to explain what it consists in, even to explain how it is possible at all. In the past three or so decades, when artificial intelligence and neuroscience became flourishing fields of research, it seemed that such explanation was within reach. Instead, however, mental causation has remained as puzzling as ever, no matter how technical and esoteric the debate on this issue has become.

Given this situation, we are well-advised to question some of the assumptions that have so far largely shaped the debate on mental causation, and that have delimited its range of outcomes. And that is what I intend to do in the present book. The enterprise will draw us into daunting issues in the fields of ontology, philosophy of mind, and especially the metaphysics of causation; but the reward will be a fresh perspective on mental causation, one that makes it fall into place in a natural way. For we will see that it is real and that it can be understood.

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