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EXPLAINING ACTIONS: THE MODEL OF TELEOLOGICAL EXPLANATION AND ITS DIFFICULTIES

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Abstract: The classical model for explaining an action (i.e. for answering the question why someone has done something) usually puts an agent's *desires* at the center of the explanation: it is because the agent desired something that the action took place. Collins argues that an appeal to *purposes* could be a more appropriate explanation, that is, he offers a teleological account of action. In his view, actions could be described as a "compensation" for a perceived lack, for an unaccomplished purpose of the agent, in the way a thermostat or a helmsman brings corrections to a perceived state of affairs. The purpose of my essay is to discuss the difficulties encountered by his proposal. I argue that one needs a clearer account for what may count as "compensatory" in order for the theory to be able to distinguish between a random event, a causal effect and a compensatory action.

Keywords: action, purpose, teleological, explanation, compensatory

1. Introduction

People have desires. These desires are mental events of some sort that cause humans to act. In order to explain their action, i.e. to explain why

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people acted the way they did, we only need to refer to the desire (or desires) that made them act, namely we need to provide an account of the cause of their actions. Once we have the cause, we also have the explanation of why they acted or the reason explaining their action. This is, in its simplified version, what Arthur Collins calls "the standard view of reason-giving", a view that he wants to criticize in his article "Action, Causality, and Teleological Explanation".[2] His own proposal is a teleological kind of explanation for action, one in which the effect rather than the cause is taken into consideration, but not *qua* effect; the intended effect of one's actions explains that person's action not by its being an effect but by its being the purpose and the outcome of the action.[3]

"Teleological" is to be distinguished here from "finalistic"; in a merely teleological explanation an appeal is made to purposes and goals but these are not considered to be efficient causes of the action, as in the "finalistic" explanation. For example, it is a teleological explanation to say that a living organism behaves in various ways because it has its own survival as a purpose, but it is finalistic to say that the purpose of surviving is what causes the organism to behave in that way.

(Naturally, if there were no genuine teleology but only pseudo-teolology (von Wright 1972), then teleological talk would be fictional. For a possible treatment, see Dumitru and Kroon (2006). It is unclear, however, whether this would change anything with respect to teolology. Whether nothing would change were genuine teleology not to exist might itself be methodologically remarkable.)

For Collins, the main proponent of the standard view is Donald Davidson with his famous "Actions, Reasons, and Causes".[4] Whether this is a correct interpretation of Davidson's text will not be the object of the present discussion. Even though Collins' attribution of the standard view

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[2] Collins, A.W., "Action, Causality and Teleological Explanation", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 9 (1), 1984, pp. 345–369.

[3] Collins has the implicit but quite clear position that he names the same thing with "purpose" and " intended outcome of an action", as a purpose is not supposed to be a mental entity or state. One of his declared purposes in the paper is to get rid of mysterious mental entities.

[4] Davidson, D., "Actions, Reasons and Causes", *The Journal of Philosophy, 60* (23), 1963, pp. 685–700.

to Davidson does not seem especially eccentric, one might become cautious about this step when reading Geoff Schueler's book, *Reasons and Purposes:*[5] the analysis of several hidden assumptions and possible interpretations of Davidson's theses might shake the conviction that one knows exactly what those theses say.

Fortunately, for the purposes of the present research, the matter can be left aside. The purpose of this research is not to examine the dispute between Collins' teleological proposal and the standard view or to take sides in this dispute. The aim is rather to analyze in greater detail the structure of what Collins calls a "compensational" kind of explanations for actions, to see the exact steps presupposed by such an explanation and to address several possible concerns about it. These concerns or possible objections will not be made from a Davidsonian point of view or on behalf of the standard view, even though they might be used by such an opponent, as I will show below. Rather, they will be concerns that can be raised from the 'inside' of Collins' position, i.e. difficulties that one may reach even though one started by accepting Collins' arguments.

I bracket the question of what it might mean to be fully rigorous or precise in providing a teleological explanation. Perhaps, inter alia, natural language has no exact logic: this would raise thorny issues concerning what it might be to genuinely verbally explain phenomena (Dumitru 2019, pp. 187–200).

Such worries aside, a brief way of describing a more concrete picture of the debate may be the following: Collins may be said to take into account here three main types of events; first, a peculiar sort of event outside the area of human action (i.e. what he calls "homeostasis"), second, a peculiar type of actions that strikingly resemble homeostasis and third, actions in general. For all three types he will claim, accompanied by suitable qualifications, that the "compensatory" type of explanation may apply. The characteristic of "compensation" seen in this manner is that the outcome of an activity (belonging or not to a human being) is pursued *in spite of* or *against* various obstacles (actual obstacles

[5] Schueler, G.F., *Reasons and Purposes. Human Rationality and the Teleological Explanation of Action*. Oxford, Clarendon, 2003.

or merely possible ones, as the use of counterfactuals shows) to be found in the environment. It is clear what is compensatory about an activity like homeostasis where an organism or a mechanism is set to 'come back' to a certain state, for example in order to maintain a certain temperature; it is also intelligible and intuitively plausible to call a certain activity like the one of a helmsman[6] "compensatory" (permanently 'correcting' the otherwise erratic course of the boat). But it requires a bit of imagination to see what can be called "compensatory" in an ordinary activity like turning on the lights. I will come back to this third case and its plausibility in the third section below.

For now, if we accept that all three types of activity can be seen in this manner, of compensating for the 'threats' or 'lacks' that the environment poses or might pose to a desired outcome, then a certain pattern can be found for all of them: to a multitude of events in the environment always corresponds a single same event which is the wanted outcome. For example, to various exterior temperatures – the same temperature (or range) maintained by a body, to various waves and wind blows – the same course maintained by the helmsman, and to various possible obstacles in the way of this action – the same turning on the lights victoriously.

In such cases the problem is: *how does one know that this is not a coincidental correspondence* or a conventional one like in the case of a function which yields the same values no matter which various arguments it takes? This problem brings other problems with it: if compensatory mechanisms include such cases of coincidental correspondence, then can we speak of teleological explanation for these cases?

My main task in this essay will be to provide an answer to the above question in the sense of identifying the condition that would exclude coincidence from compensatory mechanisms. Nevertheless, the answer will prove to be difficult to apply to all the three above mentioned types of activities.

The first section of this essay will present the outlines of Collins' text and his main arguments. The second section will consist in a detailed

[6] This is Collins' example.

presentation of the problem and the third will consist in discussing the problem and its meaning for the supporters of the teleological explanation of actions.

2. Collins' text

Arthur Collins argues for the viability of teleological explanation for human actions as opposed to what he calls "the standard view", namely the view that provides explanation of action by appeal to beliefs and desires seen as mental events causing the action. "Teleological explanation" is defined as "any explanation that derives its explanatory force from appeal to outcome, goal or objective of what is explained".[7] Collins agrees that mental events and causes and even mental events *as* causes may be discerned with respect to human action, but these do not play an essential role in the explanation of action (even though they might play an important role in the production of the action):

> "In the interpretation of reason-giving put forward here, I press for the elimination of any role for the fact (where it is a fact) that the agent wanted to attain the objective reference to which explains his action. Of course, I do not deny that agents commonly do want to reach the objectives that their actions do reach. The teleological interpretation removes reference to this antecedent desire in favor of reference to the outcome itself. The thesis that I called the standard view of reason-giving (...) regards antecedent desires and beliefs about their possible satisfaction as the very crux of reason-giving."[8]

According to Collins, the opinion that causes should be involved in reason-giving for actions comes from conflating two questions, namely the question "How is it that men are able to give reasons for their actions?" with the question "What does a man say about his action when he gives a

[7] Collins, A.W., "Action, Causality and Teleological Explanation", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 9 (1), 1984, p. 347.
[8] Collins, A.W., "Action, Causality and Teleological Explanation", p. 364.

reason for having performed it?". Consequently, reason-giving would not usually involve mentioning causes but outcomes, even if this is not the whole story. The outcomes should be accompanied by the presence of a certain disposition to remove obstacles in attaining the outcome, namely by the "compensatory aspect":

> "I do not assert that the mere fact that an action has a certain outcome will validate an explanation averring to that outcome. We must believe that the agent was disposed to compensate for some obstacles, at least, had the outcome not occurred. Action has a compensatory aspect that is entailed by reason-giving explanations but is not legible from the outcome alone."[9]

Why the compensatory aspect should be present, and how it is connected with teleological explanations, will be detailed below. For now let us note Collins' conclusion:

> "Reasons explain actions by referring them to their effects and to the compensatory character of behavior vis a vis those effects. In light of the availability of this interpretation, there is no foundation at all for the expectation that reason-giving explanations may *also* refer to the causes of what they explain."[10]

The strategy employed to support the above conclusion rests on a paradigmatic example of teleological explanation, i.e. homeostasis. The characteristics of this example, (chiefly among them: the compensatory character) are said to be found in two other types of events: first, in special kind of actions and then, enlarging the sphere, simply at large in ordinary action.[11]

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[9] Collins, A.W., "Action, Causality and Teleological Explanation", p. 364.

[10] Collins, A.W., "Action, Causality and Teleological Explanation", p. 363.

[11] It must be said that Collins does not make a detailed or systematized analysis of what/which these shared characteristics are or are supposed to be, even though their presence in all three types of activities is supposed to count as a proof of the teleologically explicable character of actions, i.e. the point of the matter. Rather than giving the characteristics, Collins seems to count on the intuitiveness of the examples he gives. An attempt at deciphering the structure of his paradigmatic example and the characteristics

Collins asserts that even though teleological explanations may have different kinds of objects (e.g. regularities, particular events, possession of organs) he chooses homeostasis (from the group of particular events) because it helps underline the importance of outcomes in reason-giving. Therefore, the first kind of events under discussion are instances of compensatory activity, like maintaining a stable body temperature.[12]

The same phenomenon (of compensation or pursuit of the outcome), Collins claims, may be easily noticed in the case of certain human enterprises and therefore a parallel can be drawn between teleologically organized systems and at least some of our ordinary actions. The parallel works with the exception of one point: the relation between the triggering event and the compensating event does not need to be causal in the case of human activity:

> "Whenever currents, swells, or wind would move the boat from the given heading, the helmsman acts so as to maintain the constant outcome-state. Here we find exactly the relationship that obtains in a physiological system with homeostatic compensatory activities, except for one point. In the exposition of physiologically based homeostasis, we required that the environmental event needing to be offset be causally related to the compensating event, which is then explained teleologically as occurring in order that homeostasis be maintained.
> In the context of action-based homeostasis, this relationship between the outcome-threat and the compensating occurrence is uncertain. ... Insofar as we are in doubt about the relationship of action and causality, we cannot simply claim a causal relationship here [between the shift in the wind and helmsman's action]."[13]

Collins will claim that the possible lack of a causal chain between the triggering and the compensating event is a bigger problem for the Davidsonian point of view than for him:

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it shares with the cases of human action will be undertaken in section three of the present essay. This section is dedicated to following Collins' own steps.

[12] He accepts that his account of homeostasis might be oversimplified because it is never clear within what range an outcome counts as "the same". But still, for an important range of cases this kind of example makes obvious the fact of compensation, i.e. the pursuit of a certain same outcome.

[13] Collins, A.W., "Action, Causality and Teleological Explanation", p. 359.

> "This uncertainty is a significant issue for the teleological interpretation of reason-giving. But uncertainty here does not tell in favor of accounts like that of Davidson."[14]

But the exact dialectic of the dispute is only tangentially relevant to the issue at hand. The focus of the essay is the structure that is supposed to be similar to all the three cases presented by Collins as able to receive a teleological explanation because they can be seen more or less as compensatory activities. Up to this point, the first two kinds were presented. Collins' strategy, presumably, is to try to show that the characteristics of the first type of event (i.e. homeostasis and its obvious orientation towards the outcome) can be met in the other two types of events, namely in certain human activities, first, and then in human activities in general.

> "A satisfactory parallel between events in a teleologically organized system and actions depends upon finding something like compensation in ordinary action."[15]

The aim of this strategy is to show that ordinary action may be explained teleologically, without appeal to causes; according to Collins, if something can be seen as compensatory then it supports a teleological explanation.

For actions belonging to the paradigm of the helmsman this did not seem to be a problem, but actions in general are, indeed, a more problematic case because the 'compensation' does not seem al all to be omnipresent and obvious:

> "But most human actions do not offer such good analogies to physiological compensatory activities. ... The difficulty, however, in seeing actions as similar to compensation stems largely from the fact that there is nothing in particular to pick out as environmental menace to a given object and, therefore, nothing for which the action could be viewed as compensating."[16]

[14] Collins, A.W., "Action, Causality and Teleological Explanation", p. 359.
[15] Collins, A.W., "Action, Causality and Teleological Explanation", p. 359.
[16] Collins, A.W., "Action, Causality and Teleological Explanation", p. 361.

Collins' solution to this difficulty is to make a distinction between homeostatic activities and teleologically explicable ones:

> "It is not the case that all organic and machine activity that is teleologically explicable is homeostatic. Enzymes are released in the saliva to bring about the secretion of hydrochloric acid, but the release of enzymes does not keep the value of some organic parameter in a constant normal range on the analogy of temperature control."[17]

Presumably, the form of Collins' argument at this point is the following: all homeostatic events are compensatory and all compensatory events are teleologically explicable; but not all teleologically explicable events are compensatory and not all compensatory events are homeostatic. Ordinary action does not show signs of being homeostatic. But if we can see it as being compensatory, then surely it may be regarded as teleologically explicable. The problem therefore becomes: can we see ordinary action as compensatory in some way? Collins seems to say that we can:

> "One might say that any action that is done to bring about something or to reach some objective compensates for the fact that the ordinary course of events does not bring about that something without help. ... Somewhat more naturally, a kind of compensatory character is detectable in the fact that circumstances sometimes do block the success of the undertaken and ordinarily effective action."[18]

There are two ideas here: first that any action could be seen as a compensation for the fact that the outcome is not present yet (i.e. comparing the actual state of affairs with the desired one, we 'compensate' for the lack of the actual state of affairs by taking action); and, second, that this hidden compensatory character is better revealed when there is an actual obstacle in the way of attaining the outcome. That is due to the fact

[17] Collins, A.W., "Action, Causality and Teleological Explanation", p. 361.
[18] Collins, A.W., "Action, Causality and Teleological Explanation", p. 361.

that the characteristic shared by the other two kinds of teleologically explicable events discussed until now, namely the pursuit of the outcome, becomes in this way observable – overcoming or cancelling various obstacles might be the analogue of the homeostatic mechanism trying to cope with different destabilizing outer events.

Therefore, we would expect someone who wants to turn the light on to do everything that involves removing obstacles. But Collins thinks that more than this is needed to establish that compensation is a characteristic of ordinary action:

> "To establish that action is essentially compensatory, however, we have to go beyond appeal to customary expectations. We have to show that reason-giving actually carries the implication that compensatory actions would have been undertaken had the explained action failed."[19]

To show that reason-giving implies compensatory actions in case of failure, Collins turns to the notion of "pro-attitude" he borrows from Davidson. The pro-attitude is the disposition to perform various actions that would bring about the desired outcome: "Any one of an indefinitely large number of actions would satisfy the want and can be considered equally eligible as its object".[20]

If reason-giving involves pro-attitudes and pro-attitudes can be equated with the phenomenon Collins calls 'compensation', then there is a stronger case for considering that ordinary action usually involves compensation:

> "Thus the concept of reason-giving explanations of actions reproduces the essential features of teleological organization that we found to account for the intelligibility of explanations that cite effects rather than causes. An explained action is referred to its objective or goal, and reason-giving explanation implies the kind of compensatory plasticity upon which the analysis of teleology was found to depend."[21]

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[19] Collins, A.W., "Action, Causality and Teleological Explanation", p. 362.
[20] Davidson in "Actions, Reasons and Causes" p.6.
[21] Collins, A.W., "Action, Causality and Teleological Explanation", p. 363.

3. The problem

What is important for Collins' thesis is the role of the constant outcome (constancy is the element that shows the importance of the outcome). The importance of the outcome (which is identified with the purpose) justifies the assertion that the explanation of an action normally does not appeal to causes, but to purposes and, therefore, can be rightly called 'teleological'.

The constancy of the outcome in Collins' examples contrasts with the variation of events exterior to the given system under discussion. This is why a pattern might be said to emerge in the case of what Collins calls the compensatory character of certain events: variability of input (events exterior to the system but affecting the system) connected with constancy of the output (the pursued outcome). Can we call any event corresponding to this pattern or scheme a compensatory event? The answer is not mysterious because in order for Collins' theory to work it must be 'no'. One may find many examples of mechanisms that correspond to the above scheme without displaying anything that might seem 'compensatory' in an obvious manner.

But how can one justify this negative answer? What is the difference, in other words, between an event with compensatory characteristics and one that merely corresponds to the above scheme? What is the difference between a body that keeps its temperature constant and some other sort of system that keeps its temperature constant because it is not affected in any way by the surrounding temperature?

An approximate direction for an answer can be found by merely looking at the paradigmatic examples: the difference between homeostasis and a mechanism that gives the same outcome is that, in the case of homeostasis, there has to be a connection between the variety of external events and the constant outcome. Moreover, only certain external events are relevant for the constant outcome.

My proposal is that, in homeostasis, we assume that the constant outcome is not a coincidence but a *response to* certain exterior events (variations in temperature). Consequently, something must link the exterior event with the internal event (of the body maintaining constant temperature). Something must show that the body *reacts* to the exterior

change in temperature. The only obvious thing connecting the two is the *causal chain*: this is how we assume that the constant outcome is not a coincidence but a response to the outer variations in temperature. Therefore, in the case of homeostasis, Collins has a ready answer to the challenge that mere coincidence is possible (even if that answer is not explicitly stated in his article).[22] But, as it is clear from the previous section, *the causal relation is the exact point of dissimilitude with the case of the helmsman or of switching on the lights:* we cannot assume, says Collins, that there is a relation of causality between the direction of the wind and the helmsman's actions.

Does the problem not re-emerge, threatening the 'compensatory' character of actions by our inability to distinguish it from coincidental constant outcome? The point of my research is not to cast doubt on the teleological explicability of common actions; for the purposes of this essay I will assume that Collins' argumentation in this sense may be regarded as successful. I aim to analyze how, on this account, a teleologically describable system differs from a system that is not teleologically explicable, as well as how this difference is articulated by the notion of "response" I have employed so far.

This might be just a methodological issue, but I find it an illuminating one: accepting Collins' arguments against the standard view does not give much information about his own view. It might be true that there is no causal relation between wind change and what the helmsman does. Perhaps another relation obtains, as our own use of counterfactuals indicates. But this is just to presuppose that some relation obtains, not to

[22] He explicitly agrees with this account in an earlier article, "Teleological Reasoning": "How does S [a system] manage to be goal-directed? We will be unable to answer this unless we can trace the causal connection between threats to G and the occurrence of the compensatory event B in S. To call B "compensation" is to assume that there is such a causal connection. As we saw in the case of neural sweat-control centers destroyed by disease, this assumption is indispensable. If it fails, the teleological explanation will be withdrawn. But a fair correlation of goal-threats and B-like events in S suffices to assure us that a causal connection must be responsible for the observations. In real cases, not just science fiction, we rightly rely on the conviction that causal connections exist though we are unable to trace them." pp. 458–9.

describe that relation, what role it plays or how the whole teleologically organized system is supposed to work.

As the problem of causal *versus* teleological account of action is a well-known and widely discussed one, I should make clear several points about the difference in framework between the problem proposed here and other concerns present in the literature. I am not concerned here with the so called "Davidsonian challenge" (in Arthur Mele's terms), where the main question is "In virtue of what is it true that a person acted in pursuit of a particular goal?".[23] Mele argues that the teleologist cannot answer this challenge and that only a causal story could account for an action having a particular reason and not another. Schueler has a nice account of this challenge:

> "The Davidson–Nagel point here is that, unless we say that my desire to see my friend caused me to head for the coffee house, we can't make sense of the thought that this is what moved me, that this was my real reason for going, rather than, say, my desire to get out of my office. Likewise, we can't makes sense of the fact that I went rather than stayed, since, after all, I had reasons for staying too; e.g., I wanted to get some more work done. I have this whole set of desires, some of which will be satisfied by going to the coffee house and some of which will be frustrated by this action (and some neither, of course). So the explanatory tools available at the level of reasons don't seem sufficient to actually explain my action. So if, as we are supposing, it is only my desire to see my friend that is my real reason for going, there must be something different about this desire that provides it with the explanatory force it has, and what can that be except that it caused me to act where the others did not? To find an explanation, we seem forced to say that this was the cause of my action." (Schueler, *Reasons and Purposes*: 51)

Perhaps, without a causal chain, we do not know which one was the reason a person really acted upon. This might be a legitimate theoretical concern or a thorny problem for the teleologist (Schueler's argues it is not). My concern is a different one. In my setting of the problem, the causal

[23] In Mele, A.R., "Goal-Directed Action: Teleological Explanations, Causal Theories, and Deviance", *Noûs, 34* (supplem.), 2000, p. 280.

connection in teleologically explicable events does not play the role of identifying reasons for action but the role of a differentiating trait: it seems to distinguish compensatory mechanisms like homeostasis from non-compensatory events that have contingently (i.e. merely lucky) recurring constant outcomes. The problem is that in actions where the causal connection is missing, no obvious trait presents itself to differentiate between compensatory and non-compensatory systems.

Collins touches upon the problem of lack of causal relation in case of common action and his thesis, I think, can be summarized in three points:

a) That lack of causal connection is no problem because compensatory character is non-causal:

> "Doubts about this causal relationship are not a serious threat to the teleological interpretation of reason-giving in any case. We required a causal relationship in the case of physiological compensatory activity in order to understand how the right compensation event manages to accompany the right threat. Without a causal relation, compensatory behavior would appear either miraculous or coincidental and, in that case, not really compensation at all. That is why we posit a causal connection between environmental changes and compensatory responses though we are ignorant of the details. In the context of action doubts about the causal character of the relation between environmental changes and compensating actions do not have the same basis at all."[24]

b) Learning what relation holds between environment and the compensating action is unimportant as long as the natural use of counterfactuals indicates that there has to be one.

c) That we can naturally distinguish between a relation of *causing* and a relation of *prompting* (even though he does not elaborate on the latter):

> "We do not suspect that if a compensating action was not caused by events threatening a goal then it is not compensation. Those who hold that actions are not caused do not mean that actions do not help to bring about objectives. Whatever the relation between environmental change and

[24] Collins, A.W., "Action, Causality and Teleological Explanation", p. 360.

> compensating act that relationship will support counterfactuals such as "Had the wind not shifted as it did, the helmsman would not have done what he did". Even in the setting of physiology it is the support of counterfactuals like this and not an actual causal story that is crucial for the recognition of the homeostasis. ... Compensation and teleology could be systematically characterized by substituting supporting counterfactuals for causal connection between threat and compensation. We could then distinguish two ways in which this condition could be satisfied, since both activities *caused by* threats to homeostasis and actions *prompted by* threats to homeostasis offer the needed counterfactual support."[25]

I believe that a closer, systematic look at the paradigmatic examples central to the discussion is a precondition for discussing these points.

4. A critique of Collins' argument

Even though Collins' argument rests on the resemblance of common action with homeostasis, there is no clear description in the text for the characteristics or structure of homeostasis. I think several stages of homeostasis can be distinguished. Some of them can be found in the ordinary action of turning on the lights, while some others seem to be missing. Comparing them might shed some light on the claim that both homeostasis and ordinary action may be regarded as compensational.

Keeping the constant temperature of a body may be said to involve the following distinctive steps in the happy, normal functioning, cases:

a) an initial point t1 where the body is in the "normal" range of temperature, i.e. the temperature that allows it to function optimally;
b) the *repeated* occurrence of an event that threatens to destabilize the system of the living body in this respect, of constant temperature (which would affect its viability): a significant decrease or increase of temperature in the environment;

[25] Collins, A.W., "Action, Causality and Teleological Explanation", p. 360.

c) a subsequent point t2 where the body's temperature starts to be modified (each time) by the exterior event, i.e. it occurs a start towards destabilizing the system;
d) point t3 where the body reacts or responds (each time) with its own mechanisms at the exterior (gradually becoming interior) threat;
e) point t4 where the system is stable again by returning to the constant temperature.

Observation: in order to decrease the chances of a random match between t1 and t4, the process needs to be repeated for various exterior threatening events.

It is easy to see that the case of the helmsman can be made to correspond point by point to these steps: the constant course, the wind, the destabilizing wave, the action and the return to the stable course of the boat.[26]

Most likely, the poignancy of homeostasis comes from its circular structure: coming back to the same state surely underlines that state as the pursued outcome and makes its attaining unsusceptible of being a mere contingency. But this exact feature, of "coming back to the same state", seems to be lost when one analyzes the more common example of switching on the lights (which is supposed to be the paradigm case for common action in general). Surely, in this third case, there is no observable temporal line like the one outlined above, with one initial state reinstated in the end: there is no switching on the lights to which we come back to. But there is, one might say, a search for the constancy of the outcome even if not a circular one. More precisely, if we try to fit this example into the previous scheme then steps a) and b) are missing and we might have an analogy for steps c), d) and e): the initial state and the threatening event are missing but we might have the signaling of a lack

[26] Consequently, a short general scheme can be issued:
a) Stability of the system
b) Potentially threatening exterior event (repeatedly)
c) Beginning of destabilizing the system (repeatedly)
d) Activity of the system in counter-reaction to the destabilizing threat (repeatedly)
e) Reinstating the initial state of stability

(sitting in the dark), the activity (the hand moving) as a remedy and the desired outcome (the light is on).

If this looks artificial, then one might take the re-modeling one step further (in a direction indicated by Collins) and say that the common action can be seen as a cycle where the initial and the final state are a match, but they are not both actual states; one of them should be a merely possible state, the one that the agent wants to attain. Therefore, on this picture, the agent should be seen as registering the difference (or the 'lack' if we want to keep the compensation vocabulary) between the state of affairs that she or he wants to bring about and the actual state of affairs; and after registering this difference, acting to reduce it to null, i.e. acting to make the actual state look like the potential one. The scheme might look[27] like this:

a) possible state to be attained – destabilizing event
b) the lack of a match between the actual state and the one to be attained in various possible scenarios – destabilizing the system
c) action to bring about a) in accordance with each possible scenario from b) – reinstating the stability of the system
d) the result: the actuality of a)

Of course, this scheme differs from the one for homeostasis, but one can still make the case for the presence of some kind of "compensatory" mechanism, one that compensates for a lack and more importantly, one where the match between point a) and point d), in spite of the variations present in b) and d), seems to make a convincing case for calling this "pursuit of a goal".

And now the main question can be asked more clearly: can the above scheme describe a coincidence? In homeostasis, coincidence was excluded by stepwise causation: the threatening state turned from "exterior" into "interior" to the organism, and the organism's activity was

[27] The scheme might look outlandish but I think it is not at all unusual or unheard of. Representing human action as the result of lack, of something missing, was such a powerful notion in the ancient Greek philosophy that the whole cosmos was modeled after it: the perfect being was immobile because movement would have been the sign of a lack or "want" and therefore an imperfection.

removing it clearly in *response* to it. How do we know in this case, of switching on the lights, that the movement of the hand is a *response* to states a) and b) (i.e. the lack of a wanted state) above? Collins's answer seems to be that the "link" we are looking for is the pro-attitude of the agent naturally and readily described by anyone with counterfactuals of the type "Had the obstacle not been where it was, the agent would not have done what he did".[28] This pro-attitude makes sure that there is no random connection between the various environmental conditions and the constancy of the outcome of the action; it is the thing that makes sure that the relevant aspects of the environment are chosen as the ones threatening the outcome and ensures their removal.

One may grant that the constant outcome is not a coincidence because it is clear to us that it is a response to factors in the environment rather than some lucky companion that happens to be present whenever those factors are present. But how did this fact become clear to us and how does this response work? Is it different or not from the kind of response we were counting on in the case of homeostasis? Let us distinguish between the three types of situations that have been discussed until now:

A) the situation in which the co-presence of various stimuli in the environment and a certain constant event is a mere contingent one or depends upon a convention (e.g. a measuring mechanism that would indicate the same figures no matter where or what it measures);
B) the situation in which the co-presence of various stimuli and a certain constant event is not contingent, a causal mechanism is involved;
C) the situation in which the co-presence of various stimuli and a certain constant event is not contingent, a certain agent is involved.

My point here is that it is true that we readily distinguish between the first situation on the one hand and the second and the third on the other hand (like Collins maintains), but we do not exactly know how we

[28] The immediately recognizable truth of the counterfactuals, Collins claims, is enough to convince us that there is a link, there is a connection such that the constant outcome is not an accident (even though we do not know what kind of connection or how it happens).

do that because no clear criteria for distinguishing between compensatory and non-compensatory systems have been provided.[29] My suggestion here was that, in cases B) and C), we regard the constant event as a *response* to the environment and so we exclude contingency. But this hardly alleviates the difficulty. For how do we identify a response? Needless to say, that is an interesting problem even if we accept that we often do distinguish correctly among the three situations.

The notion of response itself might prove problematic because it might cover quite diverse situations. The situation B) might resemble situation C) (as Collins insists) but there are significant differences between them too. The scheme provided earlier for homeostasis made clear the following structure of the entire system: two states ongoing by default collide, one being the initial state of the system, of equilibrium (constant temperature) and the other being the ongoing state of the environment (let us pick increase in temperature). These two states cannot both persist and therefore one starts changing the other, the equilibrium being affected.

No such collision need be registered in the case of action: the initial state from the scheme (i.e. the desired possible state) does not have to be changed or threatened in its continuous existence by the other ongoing state, of the environment that fails to correspond to the wish (i.e. the possible state of maintaining the course of the boat is not necessarily affected by the wind or waves). It would seem that there is an unbridgeable gap between states in this case, but we still connect the two states and call one a "response" to the other.

Collins might claim that the gap is bridgeable by the purpose connecting the two. However, in this way, we return to a somehow mysterious connection. The fact that we affirm the existence of this connection by using counterfactuals does not seem to diminish the problem. Despite this dissimilarity of the two cases, I have called (maybe inappropriately) both reactions against the environment "responses". It

[29] Again, this is not meant to be, properly speaking, a criticism of Collins' text, because he does not seem to be concerned with this problem. It is more an indication of where the research might go.

might be the case that for B) one should rather use the term "reaction" (to the environment) than "response" and that the term should be saved only for cases of actions. Schueler's distinction[30] between function and purpose might be useful at this point. The body keeping its temperature constant might be said to have the function, rather than the purpose, of keeping the temperature constant. Schueler argues that the difference consists in the fact that a purpose is not intrinsically given by the inner structure or causal history of a system. A function, however, is "readable" from the inner physical organization of the system or from its components. The function of the body keeping its constant temperature may be read from the body's organization, but there is nothing in the inner structure of a hand that would give us a clue about turning on the lights.

To illustrate how wide the difference between these two kinds of responses could be (i.e. the difference between the two ways of pursuing an outcome), one can imagine a completely unfamiliar realm, with different natural laws and unknown forms of life. Finding out in this scenario which repeating events are coincidences, which are causally triggered and which are results of an action properly performed by an agent, makes it very clear that the difference is readily registered and important. Once it would be clear that a certain recurring event is not a coincidence, the tests that one would employ to see if an agent is involved in responding or not would be relevant in establishing the criteria we employ for detecting such differences.

In conclusion, I think that even if we accept that most common actions are compensatory and therefore teleologically explicable, this result also needs an account of what exactly can be called 'compensatory' and what not. The contrast may provide a more illuminating account of what 'compensatory' is supposed to be. I have argued for the presence among the traits of a compensatory kind of activity of something like a response to the disadvantages presented by the environment at a certain moment with respect to a certain system, but the notion of "response" seems to be quite a heterogeneous one when taking into account the differences between homeostasis and action.

[30] In *Reasons and Purposes*, pp. 7–8.

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