Filosofia Unisinos
Unisinos Journal of Philosophy
17(3):340-345, sep/dec 2016
Unisinos – doi: 10.4013/fsu.2016.173.13

PHILOSOPHY SOUTH

Issues for Lowe's Dualist View on Agents

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ABSTRACT

E.J. Lowe (2008) proposes a dualist conception of agents. He grounds his dualist view on the Unity Argument, which I claim relies on unwarranted presuppositions about the agent and, therefore, cannot support his view. This is a problem for Lowe's account of actions as well, because his account relies on his dualist view of agents.

Keywords: Agents, dualism, mental states

Introduction

Explanations of actions can rely on several implicit suppositions about human agency and about what has to be captured by an accurate account of actions. Here, I will focus on the concept of agents endorsed by E.J. Lowe in *Personal Agency: The Metaphysics of Mind and Action* (2008); and I will argue that it does not resist scrutiny. Lowe's dualist view of agents is particularly relevant to his theory, for it both grounds and motivates the alleged need for his volitionist explanation of actions in order to satisfactorily account for the agent's free actions. Showing that there is a problem with the concept of agents adopted by the theory results in a problem for the theory.

In the second section, I will clarify Lowe's conception of agents and his allegation that the agent is something different from her body. In the third section, I will discuss Lowe's argument for the separation of the person and her body, and the problems it faces. Then, I will complete the criticism of Lowe's view of agents by raising some brief objections to his argument that a person's brain can be exchanged for another brain without producing any noticeable difference in the person in question.

The concept of agents

In this section E.J. Lowe's (2008) anti-reductionist view of actions and its fit with how he perceives agents will be elucidated. This will make Lowe's view on agents clear, as well as what presuppositions underlie it.[2] According to Lowe (2008), agents are psychological beings who are distinct from their bodies, and which are characterized by their causal power—a view that should be considered carefully. Lowe's definition of agents is the following:

> *An 'agent', in the sense I intend here, is a persisting object—or 'individual substance'—possessing various properties, including, most importantly, certain causal powers and liabilities. A paradigm example of an agent would be*

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[2] I call his view anti-reductionist because it maintains that the agent produces her action in a direct manner. In contrast, the Causal Theory of Action, for instance, defends the claim that the agent's mental states causally participate in the production of her action (Mele, 2003). The latter explanation of action can be called reductionist, in the sense that it does not maintain that the agent herself produces the action; instead, her mental states play the causal role.

> *a human being or other conscious creature, capable of performing intentional actions (Lowe, 2008, p. 122).*

The ideas involved in this definition should be considered point-by-point. (a) The notion of a persisting object refers to time; and it does not seem to be controversial that agents persist in time. (b) The notion of substance is associated with the (c) causal powers and liabilities the agent has, and these will need to be explained in more detail.

Regarding agents as substances, Lowe says that "I hold that I am a psychological substance coinciding with, but numerically distinct from, my animal body"[3] (Lowe, 2008, p. 167). One may conclude from this that he espouses dualism, and that this dualism is at the core of how he sees human beings as agents, because this kind of substance allegedly has causal powers that are specific to the psychological substance and not to her body. Lowe emphasises this distinction:

> *Central amongst our distinctive psychological powers are our powers of perception, thought, reason, and will. It is* I *who perceive, think, reason, and will, not my body nor any distinguished part of it, such as my brain or central nervous system (Lowe, 2008, p. 168).*

According to Lowe, it is the psychological substance, and not her body that has the power of the will; this is a key element in his account of action, as will be seen in the following. Lowe's definition of the agent as a psychological substance, distinct from her body, together with his rejection of the principle of causal closure[4] allow him to claim that physical events are not sufficient to cause the agent's movements, because the body lacks a will, which he thinks is fundamental for the agent to perform free actions. This leaves room for the will to have causal relevance in the production of the agent's actions. The power of the will is attributed to the psychological substance, not to her body, by means of which the agent causes action-results.

In order to understand Lowe's definition of agents more needs to be said about the agent's power. Lowe holds a specific view of how the agent is capable of performing intentional actions, which is related to what causal powers she may have:

> *[W]hat we seem to have in such a case is an instance of* irreducible *agent causation. Animate agents, we may feel tempted to say, are capable of* spontaneous self-movement, *which involves an agent's causing motion in its own limbs or other body parts directly (Lowe, 2008, p. 128).*

What he means by agent causation, nevertheless, is not what is traditionally called agent causation. Lowe defends the claim that agents irreducibly cause their actions, but not by directly causing them, as Agent Causation[5] would have it. He proposes what he considers to be a mix of agent causation and volitionism in order to explain human actions.

> *The volitionist believes that it is always* by willing *that we cause action results, such as arm risings, to occur when we act freely and that, indeed, our willings or volitions are causes of those events, in the event-causation sense of 'cause'. Precisely because, as we have seen, willings are not* causings, *they may qualify as events and thus as causes and effects of other events (Lowe, 2008, p. 152).*

This account allows for a mental state, a volition, to be causally relevant in the production of action-results. Lowe calls action-results the movements produced by volitions, because the agent's willing is itself her action. The agent, nonetheless, still irreducibly produces her volition: "the volitions themselves, I have said, are uncaused—and they, by my account, are not physical events, since they are exercises of a non—physical mental power" (Lowe, 2008, p. 178).

This elucidates the kind of causal power the agent is said to have on this theory. By acting in an uncaused manner—i.e., by willing—the agent causes action-results in the world. Nevertheless, the will is not a causal power in the way that magnetism is a causal power. According to Lowe, the distinction is that the agent's willing is not determined "by the causal influence of other objects" (Lowe, 2008, p. 155)—contrary to event-causation, which Lowe perceives as being determined, or chancy. Lowe's concern about event-causation is that

> *all our actions, including the supposedly free ones, are (it may be said) just* events, *and all events are either causally determined by prior events or else are chance occurrences (though their chances may be fixed by prior events). Either way, there is no room for the notion that we are the authors*

[3] What Lowe means by substances is that "a substance is an ontologically independent entity that bears properties, stands in relations to other substances, persists through time, and undergoes qualitative change over time. Most importantly, for our purposes, substances possess causal powers and liabilities. These are species of *disposition*" (Lowe, 2008, p. 165).

[4] By causal closure Lowe means: "For any physical event e, if e has a cause at time t, then *e* has a wholly physical sufficient cause at t" (Lowe, 2008, p. 63).

[5] I use the term agent causation to refer to the so called irreducible power of the agent (in opposition to event-causation), and Agent Causation to refer to the theory.

> *of our actions in any sense that would suit the libertarian (Lowe, 2008, p. 160).*

This makes clear that Lowe's rejection of the reductionist view—which accepts that actions are causally produced by events—is related to the issue of free will. Lowe believes that event-causation involves events being determined or chancy, which is said to be part of a framework in which the agent cannot be included, because agents are conceived as free. If the causing of events is not determined, this means that it would depend on chance, while chance itself also depends on previous events. Both these options are deemed unsatisfactory by Lowe, because neither would allow for the agent's freedom as uncaused choice does.

According to this view, desires and beliefs can cause actions, just not free rational action. For instance, if an agent jumps out of the way of a falling slate that would probably injure him, Lowe says:

> *[H]is action of jumping out of the way of the slate will only qualify as a free and so rational action if he chooses to jump out of the way in the light of his desire. If the desire merely causes him to jump out of the way the power of choice is not exercised by the agent on this occasion, his behavior is undoubtedly reasonable, in that it furthers his interests, but it is not an instance of rational action (Lowe, 2008, p. 186).*

The agent's choice is what makes the difference between rational and free action and just reasonable action. It is possible to conclude that this is the case because the latter lacks what Lowe calls the executive element of the production of action; i.e., the irreducible role of the agent.

The above said paints a revealing picture of what Lowe means by the agent's being "capable of performing intentional actions" (2008, p. 122) and her causal powers. The account of how agents perform actions assures the kind of free will that Lowe considers relevant: "on this view, persons are agents inasmuch as they are *substance-causes* of certain events" (Lowe, 2008, p. 147).

The proposed dualism and the defence of the will are therefore necessary to account for free actions, because Lowe believes that free actions cannot be caused; they must be uncaused. The uncaused will is attributed to the human agent portrayed as a psychological substance distinct from her body, because the body is associated with the event-causation of movements. In this sense, the psychological substance, which is the agent, can be conceived as being free in the sense considered relevant in this theory, and this is what motivates Lowe's volitionist account of actions.

Lowe's picture of agency therefore associates the agent with the psychological substance, not with her body, making this conception of agents and his view of agency dependent on the claim that that the psychological substance has the said power of the will, and that she is in fact something different from her body. If the agent was identified with her body, one may conclude that Lowe would consider her actions unfree. In this case, the agent would not fit the volitionist theory. In the next section I will consider the arguments offered by Lowe to support his dualist view, which grounds his view of agents as psychological substances.

The agent as a different substance

In this section, Lowe's argument that the person is a different substance to the body will be discussed and criticised. It will be argued that Lowe's position does not withstand scrutiny. In short, the Non-Cartesian Substance Dualism proposed by Lowe is an ontological distinction based on the identity conditions of persons—subjects of experience[6]—and their bodies; allegedly, the person cannot be identified with her body and vice-versa. According to his view, a substance is a bearer of properties and characteristic causal powers; thus, the psychological substance bears psychological properties and has a causal power that supplements those of her body.

Lowe argues that the person, or self,[7] is not identical to her body because the body is not the subject of one's experience. Only the person is the subject of her experiences, and the person cannot be identical to her body or her brain. Lowe posits the Unity Argument as the strongest argument in support of the claim that the person is not identical to her body:

> (1) I am the subject of all and only my own mental states, which is a self-evident truth. The second premise is this:
> (2) Neither my body as whole [*which we will consider here 'my brain as a whole'*][8] nor any part of it could be the subject of all and only my own mental states.
> And its conclusion, which undoubtedly follows from the two premises, is this:
> (3) I am not identical to my body nor with any part of it (Lowe, 2008, p. 96).

[6] Lowe considers the agent a person, and the person as a subject of experience. "*Subjects of experience*—understanding 'experience' here in a broad sense, to include not just sensory and perceptual experience, but also introspective and cognitive states or, in other words, 'inner' awareness and thoughts" (Lowe, 2008, p. 94).

[7] Lowe uses *persons* and *selves* interchangeably.

[8] Lowe allows that "my body as whole" can be substituted by "my brain as a whole" in case physicalists identify the self with the brain (2008, p. 97).

This conclusion is unwarranted, though. It may be hard for the monist to find a reason to accept (1), that I am the subject of *only* my mental states. She may believe that the person's physical properties are attributable to the person as well. Here, nevertheless, I will concentrate on the second premise. Premise (2) is Lowe's identity criterion; therefore, it is exactly what Lowe is trying to argue. He already assumes that the body is not the bearer of experience; thus, it is a different substance, which makes it necessary to postulate that the person is a substance that is the subject of her mental states, considering that substances are understood as bearers of properties. But this is what he is trying to prove in the first place, meaning that the argument is simply question begging. Lowe, of course, is not unaware that he needs to argue for (2); he gives it the following support:

> *All that I am claiming is that there is no part of my brain which is such that, were* any part of it*—such as one particular neuron—to be destroyed, all of my mental states would thereby cease to be. That is to say, neither my brain* as a whole*, nor any distinguished part of it* as a whole*, is something with which I can be identified—any more than I can be identified with* my body *as a whole—because no such entity is such that all and only* my *mental states can be taken to depend on it, in the way that they clearly do depend on* me *(Lowe, 2008, p. 98).*

In order to understand Lowe's claims it will help to structure them: (i) the person needs a brain to have mental states, but she does not need the brain as a whole in order to have all of her mental states. This is equated to saying that (ii) all and only one's mental states cannot depend either on the brain as a whole nor on any part of it as a whole, i.e., neither the brain nor a neuron can be the subject of all of one's mental states; only the subject of one's mental states can. So, Lowe concludes that (iii) the person is not identical with her brain or any part of it.

Observed closely, (i) still needs support, for there is no reason why a monist should accept it. Lowe supports it by pointing out that one could not have one's mental states if one's brain was destroyed; however, all of one's mental states are unaffected if a neuron ceases to exist. This means that my brain does not have to be whole in its integrity in order for me to have all of my mental states; and therefore it is not the subject of my experiences, because all of one's mental states continue to exist even if the brain loses a neuron (see Lowe, 2008, p. 98-99).

The argument, and premise (i), depend on Lowe's claims about *all of one's mental states*. This claim will be discussed below, since (ii) also depends on Lowe's presuppositions about *all of one's mental states*. It is no coincidence that Lowe treats claim (ii) as a clarification of premise (i): according to Lowe's theory, they are saying similar things. I now turn to unveiling the presuppositions in this view.

One must keep in mind that Lowe is aiming at supporting premise (2), from the Unity Argument, but his second argument brings out something interesting. In (ii) Lowe says that all of one's mental states do not depend on one's body or a body part, so he already assumes that one's mental states form a unity; according to his theory, this unity is born by the self, to which they can be identified. This may come as no surprise since it is supporting something called the Unity Argument, but it is hard to see why Lowe would believe that it is uncontroversial that a person's mental states are a unity.

There is evidence showing that if a certain part of the brain is lesioned, the person ceases to have certain mental states. This makes it hard to accept that all of one's mental states depend on either the brain as a whole or on a part of it as a whole—e.g. a neuron. It is possible that different mental states are related to different brain activities, and that a lesion to some neuronal networks will not lead to the person losing all of her mental states, but perhaps to her losing a few introspective and cognitive states (to use Lowe's terms). So why would Lowe claim that in order to depend on one's brain all of one's mental states would have to be subject to the brain *as a whole*, or to a part of it *as a whole*?

The best explanation is that Lowe is not talking about mental states; he is talking about all of one's mental sates as a unity, which characterises the self. Lowe is already presupposing that all of the person's mental states form a unity that, as such, have in common a bearer of these mental states that unifies them: the self.

It could be argued that mental states have something in common that allows classifying them all as mental states; however, this does not imply that they form an ontologically distinct unit. The same can be said of whatever allows classifying my phone's apps as apps. I believe that few people, if any, would accept that this implies that they form an ontologically distinct unity of all of my phone's apps. If what makes mental states a unity is that they are all subject to the same thing, then they are subject to the self, and the psychological substance is their bearer, according to this view. Therefore, all of one's mental states cannot be subject to a neuron or to the brain by definition.

But why would the monist accept these presuppositions? My objection is that Lowe grounds his defence of his dualist conception of persons on implicit suppositions about mental states and their relation to the person as he conceives her, i.e., as a psychological substance that is the bearer of all of her mental states and distinct from her body. Lowe is assuming what he is trying to argue: that all of one's mental states form a unit subject to the self, and his defence of this view assumes that mental states are a unity that would have to *together* depend on either the brain as a whole or on a part of the brain, a neuron, if it did depend on the body. When Lowe states that neither the brain nor any part of it is "something with which I can be identified" (Lowe, 2008, p. 98), he assumes that one's mental states are a kind of unity, an *I*, or a self, as he puts it.

There is no reason to set out from the idea of *all* mental states as subject to one irreducible bearer of them all. Certainly a person needs her brain in order to have mental states, but contrary to what Lowe defends it does not seem that the relation between brain activity and mental states[9] can be understood as the relation of all of one's mental states and the brain. It seems that the activity of certain neuronal networks can be related to certain mental states.

One piece of evidence for this relation is that if the brain is lesioned and a certain network of neurons is damaged this usually results in a loss of cognitive capacities and states, such as language comprehension, perception, attention, memories, planning complex actions, etc. (Gazzaniga, 2009). It is even the case that a person may recuperate from some of these losses, thanks to the human brain's plasticity, if the relevant neurons reorganize their connections and activity in an appropriate way (Gazzaniga, 2009; Lüdemann-Podubecká and Nowak, 2016).

It is open to the monist, therefore, to claim that Lowe has not shown that there is a set or substance that might be *all* of one's mental states. The monist may even think that the burden of the proof is on Lowe, since he is the one defending the existence of an extra substance. It is easy enough to accept the existence of bodies, but there is no reason why one should accept the existence of all of one's mental states, conceived as ontologically different substance and born by the self.

I have presented an analysis of Lowe's argument for dualism. His version of substance dualism grounds his conception of agents, which in turn is relevant for his volitionist account of human actions. I have argued that Lowe implicitly presupposes his dualist conception of agents; therefore it fails to provide support for his view of dualism and for his conception of agents. Given that according to his theory the agent's will depends on the psychological substance, this is also an issue for Lowe's account of actions.

Brain replacement and neuroscience

In this section I will briefly discuss an illustration of the independence that Lowe proposes one's mental states have from the brain. The argument is that the scenario presented by Lowe, which draws on his conception of an agent as a psychological substance distinct from her body, does not conform to what neuroscience has been able to clarify about brain activities and their relation to mental states, especially brain plasticity. Lowe's view on the agent's relation to her brain is at the centre of this discussion.

It is clear that brain activity is crucial for mental states. Neurons connect to each other like a network, and when these networks are damaged, depending on the amount of damage, this affects the person's cognitions, and even personality. Lowe, however, does not believe that there is a strong connection between a person, as he conceives of persons, and her brain:

> *Anyway, quite apart from anything else, it seems clear that, even granted that I need a brain in order to be able to think, I don't need to have the particular brain that I have. I find nothing inconceivable in the thought that I might wake up one morning to be told (truly) that, overnight, I had undergone an operation in which my old organic brain was somehow replaced by a new inorganic one (Lowe, 2008, p. 21).*

On Lowe's view, a person is a different substance from her body, as we saw above. So the person does not need the specific brain she has in order to think the thoughts she thinks; another brain would be sufficient for thinking. This is an odd claim. One evidence of its questionability is the brain's plasticity.[10] The brain changes throughout a human being's life, because genetics, experience, stimulation, and learning contribute to the development of the connections between neurons that are associated with the representation of memories, abilities, and even with personality traits (Freund *et al.*, 2013; Maguire *et al.*, 2000).

There is evidence that each person's brain is different because of all the cited factors, and perhaps other factors as well (Miller, 2012). In fact, these factors have been associated with the development of individuality, and they are taken to account for differences in individuals' behaviour and personality (Freund *et al.*, 2013). By this I do not mean to claim that the brain is the cause of mental states or properties; I am only claiming that there is evidence that they are related. Contrary to what Lowe seems to believe, each brain is relevant to each person's behaviour and psychological properties. If this is the case, it is highly unlikely that a person's brain could be exchanged for another without any noticeable difference to her. The person does not seem to be something different from her body in the way that Lowe believes she is.

Even if one accepts a sci-fi scenario in which an inorganic brain could be produced, in order to replace one's brain it would have to somehow (however its engineering allows) represent what the brain activity in the original organic brain represents. It must be noted that the relevant brain activity is compatible with the specific connections in the individual's

[9] I will not take a stand on what the relation between mental states and brain activity might be. I shall remain neutral on this issue and accept only that there is significant evidence that mental states are correlated to somewhat specific brain activities. By this I do not mean to say that a certain neuronal network is the bearer of a mental state, and therefore that these are necessarily identical.

[10] Plasticity is the brain's capacity to change its structure due to development, new experiences, and environmental demands (Baars and Gage, 2010, p. 82).

neuronal network, which is specific to her; therefore, these specificities would have to be reproduced in the inorganic brain if the replacement aims at avoiding any noticeable difference. This is enough to show that there are very particular aspects of each brain that are relevant to the person, and for each person it is not enough to have just any brain in order to think the thoughts one thinks.

Conclusion

I have argued that the conception of the agent as a psychological substance, as well as the concern with a specific conception of free will motivate and support Lowe's volitionist theory of action. However, his argument for his dualist view of the agent does not withstand scrutiny, and I claim that this has serious consequences for his theory. If the proposed dualism is rejected, Lowe's theory lacks its ground support.

Acknowledgements

This paper was made possible by grants 2011/21030-0 and 2014/02558-1, São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP).

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Submitted on November 30, 2016
Accepted on March 13, 2017