

Swindal, James. *Action and Existence: The Case for Agent Causation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

In *Action and Existence: The Case for Agent Causation*, James Swindal develops and defends a detailed, well-informed, and therapeutic argument valuable to anyone with serious interests in pragmatism, action, and agency. Specifically, Swindal has a solid grasp of the history and logic of current debates at the intersection of “analytic” and “neo-pragmatic” philosophy. On the one hand, subsequent to reading Swindal’s engagement with the problems of pragmatism, a reader should be in a better position to engage thinkers such as Jurgen Habermas, Robert Brandom, Nicholas Rescher, Joseph Margolis, Cheryl Misak, Cornell West, Hans Joas, and Richard Rorty. As such, Swindal’s “Introduction” and “Chapter 1” would work quite well in both undergraduate and graduate courses where an overview of the contemporary scene of pragmatism and action would be relevant. On the other hand, by focusing on the “existential” aspects of action, beyond the analytic and (neo)pragmatic literature, Swindal’s book uniquely relates to the literature regarding “agent causation.” Swindal’s “primary thesis is that agents act responsibly only by their proper situation of the domains of both the desires for ends and their beliefs about means to the ends” (p. 12). Hence, “a complete description and explanation of action requires the analysis of existential determinations consistent with the experiences of agents as actors” (p. 94).

In order to appreciate the important contribution of Swindal’s book to the contemporary debate, it helps to have a sense of what is at stake in the debate. In his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty claims that “there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory.”¹ Furthermore, it follows for Rorty from the “contingency of language” that “there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a meta-vocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies, all ways of judging and feeling.”² Hence, Rorty defines his “ironist” as having “doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses,” and because “her present vocabulary” cannot “dissolve these doubts,” Rorty—though, of course, ironically—suggests that no vocabulary can put one “in touch with a power not herself.”³ Whereas Rorty’s notion of vocabulary is

¹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. xiv.

² Ibid., p. xvi.

³ Ibid., p. 73.

already an interpretation of Immanuel Kant by substituting language for a conceptual schema in experience,⁴ in terms of this debate, normativity is substituted for vocabularies.

The issue central to Swindal's debate and the question of what to do with the tradition of pragmatism that we have inherited⁵ concerns how socially to reconcile different norm-governing schema across agents. If there is no meta-normative schema by which to determine the correctness of each individual agent's relation to norms, then how can one decide which competing norms should govern action? Notice that this perplexity involves "self-creation" at the level of the individual agent and "justice" at the social level of interacting agents. Swindal elsewhere locates the debate by noting: "Some philosophers have developed comprehensive interactive models that purport to exhibit the various normative constraints that agents need to adopt in order to achieve what otherwise would be an unattainable and unsustainable social order."⁶ Furthermore, he describes the participation of Habermas and Brandom in this debate, noting that "social philosophers as of late have developed holistic models of socially developed and sustained normative systems."⁷ Critically, then, Swindal identifies a "problem" with the approaches, despite internal differences between Habermas and Brandom; according to Swindal, "their reliance on forms of *deontic* constraint to solve coordination dilemmas cannot sufficiently account for the role of agent-centered purposive action in such normative systems."⁸ This pertains directly to Rorty's perplexity regarding action, since "[d]eontic constraints are determinations of consistency or inconsistency that can be applied to semantic and inferential expressions of decisions to act."⁹

Swindal's contribution to the debate, then, looks beyond deontic constraints that can be applied to decisions regarding action to the "existential determinations consistent with the experiences of agents as actors" (p. 94). As such, Swindal's proposal goes further than Habermas or Brandom toward

⁴ Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1982), p. 4.

⁵ Cf. Arthur Lovejoy, "The Thirteen Pragmatisms," in Arthur Lovejoy, *Thirteen Pragmatisms and Other Essays* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1963), pp. 1-29.

⁶ James Swindal, "Norms and Causes: Loosing the Bonds of Deontic Constraint," *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2, no. 1 (2012), p. 117.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 118.

⁹ Ibid.

bringing “self-creation together with justice.” Moreover, Swindal’s “existential” approach differs from Habermas’s and Brandom’s, “which hold[s] that a non-normative analysis of action is neither desirable nor in fact possible” (p. 74). Swindal’s model may be thought of as occupying “a middle ground between a pure naturalism (where instinct dominates) and a pure regularism, or ‘normativism’ (where reason dominates).”¹⁰ Whereas Donald Davidson suggests that “we have discovered no analysis of [the relation between a person and an event] that does not appeal to the concept of intention,”¹¹ Swindal’s account suggests that “an inner conflict” does *not* occur “between the intentional states competing to prevail and thus determine an action.”¹² Rather, the inner conflict occurs “as a permanent tension arising from the concise spatial and temporal situation of each agent action relative to a history, both past and anticipated of action outcomes.”¹³

Beyond presenting a viable alternative to the approaches of Habermas and Brandom, then, Swindal successfully illustrates the manner in which the existential approach through an understanding of agent causation can solve what Rorty took to be the central problem of the contemporary debate regarding *our* inheritance of pragmatism and democracy. The following summary and analysis of Swindal’s *Action and Existence* should be seen in part as providing support for this claim.

An interesting contrast between social theorists and post-analytic philosophers can be seen in the way pragmatism is emphasized. As post-analytic philosophers such as Brandom celebrate the extent to which they see pragmatism as freeing them from the constraints of truth, social theorists such as Joas celebrate pragmatism’s affirmation of the creativity inherent in experience. Joas’s focus on Charles Sanders Peirce’s notion of abduction illustrates that “[o]nly because we assume there to be more than mere chance involved in the creative act of forming hypotheses do we give the scientist credit for it.”¹⁴ Yet, this insight is not lost in Swindal’s book. For example, he notes that the “impetus for this study was the purported failure of recent analytic and neo-pragmatic views to provide sufficient grounds for action description and explanation” (p. 163).

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 117.

¹¹ Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 61.

¹² James Swindal, “Norms and Causes: Loosing the Bonds of Deontic Constraint,” p. 132.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Hans Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, trans. J. Gaines and P. Keast (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 134.

In his Introduction, Swindal provides the three “models” which “frame” his analysis. These are the “Epistemic,” “Pragmatic,” and “Metaphysical.” There are three kinds of epistemic accounts: the Cartesian, the Hegelian, and the Existential. Pragmatic accounts consist of the “causal strategy,” which Swindal associates with W. V. O. Quine; “the experimental strategy,” which in its “satisficing” form he associates with Rorty; and the “discursive strategy,” which he associates with Hegel, Wittgenstein, Habermas, and Brandom, among others (p. 6).¹⁵ In regard to the metaphysics of action, citing a tradition associated with Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas among others, Swindal notes that action is “understood as a species of movement” (p. 9). It follows, then, that “[a]ctions are observable effects that emerge from, but are not reducible to, a set of internal states (thoughts and desires) of an actor possessing the metaphysical status to act” (p. 9). Lastly, invoking the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Swindal affirms the presence and causal efficacy of “character.” Character is “the result of nature and habituation”; “Our characters become a medium through which perceptions appear to us, even our perceptions of practical ends” (p. 10).

In Chapter 1, Swindal explains what he means by “the *normative fallacy*”: “The fallacy is to presuppose that all action, to be intelligible, must be rule bound, and then to assert that whatever way actions are intelligible excludes the possibility of actions that defy categorization in a set of rules” (p. 10). Not only are both Habermas and Brandom guilty of the normative fallacy, but the entire “Pittsburgh School” of philosophy is in danger of being guilty of it.¹⁶ Swindal ultimately concludes “that without a sufficient analysis of intentional action, from a first person perspective, a pragmatic theory alone cannot make a coherent link between belief, meaning, or truth, on the one hand, and action, on the other” (p. 11).

In Chapter 2, Swindal provides his understanding of action as an “existential unity,” along with some of his “methodological presuppositions,” and justification for his “contention” that “intentional analysis of action can be done only from a regressive, or reconstructive, vantage point” (p. 11). This latter insight regarding the regressive nature of intentional analysis combined with his notion of the “normative fallacy” constitute two of the best contributions from Swindal’s book to the above-noted contemporary debate and discourses regarding the intersection between post-analytic philosophy and neo-pragmatism.

Chapter 3 discusses the history of action theory from the “Aristotelian-scholastic view” through the “modern tradition” and German Idealism. Importantly, Swindal explains, “Potency, for Aristotle, is reduced to

¹⁵ Cf. Michael Byron, *Satisficing and Maximizing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Cf. Chauncey Maher, *The Pittsburgh School of Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

act by an agent acting relative to an end,” and “Externally viewed, actions are of two types: *poiesis*, or making, which adds a new durable artifact to the world; and *praxis*, or doing, which adds a new deed or speech to the political realm” (p. 46). Chapter 4 combines this history with a discussion of the “very possibility of a criteria definition of action” (p. 11). Here Swindal moves through “functionalist views of action” exemplified in the “post war period” by Wittgenstein (whose “view that actions were to be understood, not as fulfilling the mandates of a biological or social system, but as the following of rules immanent to an intersubjective web of meanings”) to “the emergence of analytic theories of action” and the post-analytic “semantic reconstruction of action” (p. 81). Swindal, then, criticizes each of the views of action in turn, producing a “working definition” of an action: “actions are existential unities reconstructable as bodily movements caused by an agent in light of an intended end” (p. 105).

In Chapter 5, Swindal examines “how actions are explained” (p. 105). Whereas the “definition provides *criteria* on the basis of which an action can be picked out,” “the explanation gives the *conditions* on the basis of which one can say *why* the action happened” (p. 105). Moreover, in this way Swindal clarifies that “[s]ome philosophers speak of the *justification* of actions, by which actions are understood as moral” (p. 105). Hence, Swindal reveals, “On my view, actions are explained by the agent’s inference that *because of the agent’s action an intended state of affairs exists here and now*” (p. 105). Recalling, then, his criticism of the regressive nature of intentional analysis, he notes, “*the explanation of action is coextensive with the reconstruction of the inferences involved in the agent’s deliberation and performance of the action*” (pp. 105-6).

Chapters 6 and 7 constitute the discussion of the existential approach to action. Whereas Chapter 6 pertains to action as a species of motion, Chapter 7 examines action as emerging from (but not reducible to) a set of internal states and in regard to the causal efficacy of character as a coupling of nature and habit. In other words, recalling Swindal’s Introduction, these last two chapters of the book work the existential view of action through the metaphysics of action. Swindal concludes “that *human actions*, as distinct from behaviors and habits, are *momentous*: they are motivated only by *existential* (metaphysical) *considerations that cannot be accounted for by epistemic or pragmatic considerations* of beliefs and desires alone” (p. 11). Hence, “[a]gent causation is thus the existential explanans of action” (p. 164).

I take Swindal’s book to have achieved its purpose in that it provides methodological, historical, and textual support to advocate for the existential understanding of action as an alternative approach to post-analytic and neo-pragmatist positions in the debate focused on reconciling individual freedom with social justice; however, there are still some critical points and questions worth reviewing.

In developing his “working definition” of action, Swindal invokes Davidson’s analysis of action into the basic elements of “belief, desire, and intention,” noting that “[i]f you *believe* that a friend can take a criticism,” then

if your friend is offended, “we tend to think that you are nonetheless not to be reprimanded for the action [since] . . . no offense was *intended*” (p. 93). From here Swindal begins discussing Kant in what seems like a manner that supplements Davidson’s analysis. However, since Swindal had just completed a “critical analysis of functionalist, *analytic*, and semantic models,” it is not immediately clear how Davidson’s three analytic elements link with Kant’s “four analytically distinct perspectives” (p. 93). Swindal notes a “rough” correspondence, but a bit more discussion here would be welcome.

Swindal might have provided more specificity in his discussion of non-being and memory at the end of this book.¹⁷ Swindal’s argument seems sufficient by way of Aristotle; however, his discussion of Kant’s thoughts on non-existence could be less general. For example, consider the following footnote:

Technically, then, the logical term ‘non-being’ is not of concern here. On the other hand, *the transcendental term* ‘not-being,’ is, at least for Kant. . . . My use of ‘non-existence’ opposes ‘existence’ *not transcendently*, but metaphysically [emphasis added]. The possible non-existence of an existent is constitutive of reality. (p. 185)

The idea here is that looking to the agent’s memory is a way of noticing what an agent brings to a situation that otherwise cannot be accounted for in terms of the present event-causal physical instantiation of objects in the environment.¹⁸ Agents can improvise. Events in a causally determined physical world seem to experience difficulty improvising. Hence, the agent’s improvisational creative relation to its environment may be accounted for by the memory also known as its character, and this refers to agent causation, since the agent, *via* its memory character, is most important in the series of causes resulting in an environmental improvisation.¹⁹ Such an argument is important for Swindal because, once established, all attempts to reduce action to rule following or a network of event causes are blocked.

Furthermore, Swindal does not specify what kind of memory is at work regarding the non-existence of the future to-be-instantiated-object. He seems to waver between regarding the status of such a memory as singular or

¹⁷ Cf. Frank Scalabrino, “Non-Being & Memory” (PhD diss., Duquesne University, 2011).

¹⁸ Cf. Frank Scalabrino, “Mnemo-psychography: The Origin of Mind and the Problem of Biological Memory Storage,” in *Origins of Mind*, ed. L. Swan (New York: Springer, 2012), pp. 327-39.

¹⁹ Cf. Frank Scalabrino, “From a phenomenology of the reciprocal nature of habits and values to an understanding of the intersubjective ground of normative social reality,” *Phenomenology and Mind* 6 (2014), pp. 156-67.

multiple.²⁰ We can remedy this quickly here, though, by merely pointing out that the memory in question is what contemporary memory research refers to as “implicit” and “procedural.”²¹ There is not enough space here to explore the manner in which this extends Swindal’s Aristotelian-Existential argument. The assumption to avoid is that memory would not be of the agent-causal system if it were not explicit. Such an assumption unnecessarily presupposes experiential criteria from which ubiquitous rule-following and discursivity may follow for action.²²

Swindal suggests that Brandom “provides a non reductive and non circular account of the factual and normative aspects of action formation assessment” (pp. 27-28). However, this deserves a second look.²³ For example, on the one hand, Brandom asserts, “I think one can understand facts as true claims, acknowledge that claiming is not intelligible apart from vocabularies, and still insist that there were true claims, and hence facts, before there were vocabularies.”²⁴ On the other hand, beginning a section in his *Perspectives on Pragmatism* titled “Social Pragmatism about Knowledge,” Brandom asserts, “If this is right, then we are not, as Rorty claims, precluded from talking about facts making our claimings true. We can only understand the notion of a fact by telling a story that makes reference to vocabularies.”²⁵ He goes on to clarify, “though notice . . . we can also only understand the notion of a vocabulary as part of a story that includes facts. But this does not entail that there were no facts before there were vocabularies.”²⁶

There are a few minor textual issues which a reader might find confusing. In his Introduction, Swindal announces that he will be explaining

²⁰ James Swindal, “Norms and Causes: Loosing the Bonds of Deontic Constraint,” p. 132 n. 60.

²¹ Cf. Frank Scalabrino, *Non-Being & Memory*.

²² Cf. Frank Scalabrino, “From a phenomenology of the reciprocal nature of habits and values to an understanding of the intersubjective ground of normative social reality.”

²³ Cf. Robert Brandom, *Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent, and Contemporary* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 125-27; Robert Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2009); Frank Scalabrino, “Tales of the Mighty Tautologists? Do Normative Functionalists reduce the differentiating function of non-discursive habit in experience to *post hoc* logical possibility?” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2, no. 1 (2012), pp. 83-97.

²⁴ Brandom, *Perspectives on Pragmatism*, p. 125.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 127.

what he calls the “pragmatic fallacy” (p. 10), though in the Table of Contents and rest of the book he refers to this as the “normative fallacy” (pp. 16 and 24-25). Note 47 in Chapter 2 refers to a book that is not listed in the Bibliography. Various three-fold divisions follow one another such that they might imply a mapping on to one another; however, there are at least two places where they do not map on to one another. This may slow a reader’s flow. For example, he has a listing in one place of “models of action,” that is, the event-causal, functionalist, and teleological models (p. 94). These follow directly on the heels of the functionalist, analytic, and semantic views of action. However, the event-causal and teleological here refer to the “analytic” (cf. p. 78). Also, the Introduction is divided by the epistemic, pragmatic, and metaphysical accounts of action, and each of these accounts is further divided by three. Without an explicit disclaimer from Swindal, I spent time looking for what I took to be a pattern intentionally instantiated here. However, in concluding his Introduction (p. 12) and in the concluding chapter of the book, the existential seems to have shifted from one “strategy” of the epistemic accounts—alternative to the Cartesian and Hegelian—to be, perhaps, equated with the metaphysical itself. His movement between “strategy” and “model” (pp. 3-4) might also contribute to confusion here. Lastly, I take “devolves” (p. 12) to mean “unfolds,” and not to have any derogatory connotation, since it pertains to the very account for which he is advocating.

There are other minor non-textual issues to consider. First, though Swindal places Quine in his “causal” pragmatist designation and Brandom in the “discursive,” to what extent is Brandom gesturing toward a reduction of agent to event causation—the hallmark of the “causal” designation? Second, to what extent does Swindal see any overlap between his notion of the existential determinations of action and Rorty’s anti-representationalism, that is, an account “which does not view knowledge as a matter of getting reality right, but rather as a matter of *acquiring habits of action* [emphasis added] for coping with reality”?²⁷ Third, Swindal begins and ends his book with reference to Homer’s *Odyssey*. The allusion to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer is clear; for example, discussing Odysseus, they note, “The word must have direct power over *fact*; expression and *intention* penetrate one another The word is emphasized in order to change the *actuality* [emphasis added].”²⁸ So, though Adorno and Horkheimer may fall outside the scope of the goal of his book, perhaps a discussion of their relation to discursive pragmatism might fill in the reference to Homer. Fourth, Joas seems to hold a wider typology of action than that provided here,²⁹ and he also

²⁷ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Vol. I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 1.

²⁸ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1993).

²⁹ Hans Joas, *Pragmatism and Social Theory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago

seems to be critical of a singularly means-ends analysis of action. Lastly, placing Heidegger in the discursive pragmatist lot might require some justification.

However, these points do not detract from the overall success of Swindal's project. Swindal's book is worth the time to read, and could be used to supplement a number of different courses in interesting ways, such as courses on agent causation, the history of pragmatism, post-analytic methodology, or the history of action theory, among others.

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