

## Introduction: Nothing from Nothing

Things happen. Often we try to explain them. When Edmond Halley looked back on records of passing comets, he noticed that one seemed to appear every seventy-six years. He then thought hard about orbital velocity and gravity, drawing on what he knew about mathematics and physics. When a fashionable young man cut off a lock of hair belonging to a fashionable young woman, Alexander Pope wrote a poem. He thought hard about human actions, drawing on what he knew about motivation and desire. Halley and Pope both understood that neither comets nor cuttings come into the universe from nothing. Yet for Halley, the comet's return didn't have anything to do with beliefs or decisions. The comet didn't choose to shoot by earth. Rather, its particular mass and distance from the sun put it on an unalterable ellipse. For Pope, the cutting of the lock had little to do with the properties of metal shears or strands of hair. The Baron chose to cut Belinda's hair. Pope would like to know *why* he did so:

Say what strange Motive, Goddess! cou'd compel  
A well-bred *Lord* t'assault a gentle *Belle*?  
Oh say what stranger Cause, yet unexplor'd,  
Cou'd make a gentle *Belle* reject a *Lord*?<sup>1</sup>

Were we to examine the Baron's motives, Pope says, we might discover *why* he cut Belinda's hair. Were we to examine hers, we might discover *why* she rejected his advances. Were we to do either, we would learn how motives serve as *causes*, "am'rous Causes" to be exact. Enclosed in the two couplets therefore is an implicit theory.

Belinda and the Baron are agents. Their actions have causes. Among these causes are states of mind. We may go even further. States of mind distinguish actions like the rape of the lock from events like the appearance of Halley's comet.<sup>2</sup> They do so because they serve a causal role. States of mind make something happen, just like states of physical matter. In other words, Pope plucks minds from other kinds of things only to make us wonder how far the distinction goes.

This book is about minds and actions in Restoration and eighteenth-century Britain. It examines how writers described what precedes and constitutes an agent's doing something, whether writing a letter or fleeing a kingdom. The topic gathered new attention during the period because it opened the possibility for a causal theory of behavior in line with causal theories applied elsewhere in the natural world. If desires, fears, beliefs, and so on were like causes and actions were like effects, some said, then minds were similar to other things in the environment; if minds represent the world in motion, others responded, they were in some special sense distinct from everything else. The discussion animated genres as diverse as the treatise, the lyric, and the novel. Sometimes it concerned matters as ordinary as the lifting of one's feet; other times it engaged topics as broad as what it means to be a person. In each case, the concern was how states of mind might prompt, accompany, or follow the movement of physical bodies. In this introduction, I will set out the conceptual issues involved in the period's consideration of actions. I'll then turn to a chapter-by-chapter summary of my argument. If my sense of this book is right, several of my formulations may be surprising, so I'll present them in some detail.

One might expect a book about minds to validate the long-standing sense that the eighteenth century witnesses a new language of inwardness or subjectivity associated with the joint rise of empirical philosophy and the novel.<sup>3</sup> I complicate this thesis by pointing to the largely unacknowledged role of external factors in the period's conception of mind. In the works I examine, the distinguishing

feature of minds is the causal role they do or do not play in physical movement. So while the writers I feature develop techniques to show minds at work, their goal is to describe why certain actions occur and how mental states fit into the rest of the world. The ostensible privacy or interiority of mental states is often not an issue. We may think of this as an important property of actions. *Actions extend mind into the world*. Belinda might conceivably be thinking about all sorts of things in the course of her day, from the taste of tea to troubles with Betty. Pope is interested in why she rejected the Baron, however, and so therefore looks at her reasons for doing so. The same might be said for many of the well-known and incidental actions mulled over in the writing of the period. Why did Evelina accept Orville's invitation to dance? Why did Moll steal that bundle? Any time a writer asks why such an event happened, she pares mental states into those fixed to behavior, the desires or beliefs that form reasons for acting. To the degree to which literary history has focused on inwardness or privacy, therefore, it has missed several important features of mind-talk during the long eighteenth century. This book looks closely at three such features as they take the form of nagging questions: Are actions freely chosen or subject to necessity? How do mental properties cause physical change? How can a physical object be the locus of conscious experience?

Let's start with the first question. The notion that human behavior might be discussed in causal terms brought with it a serious entailment. As soon as we know all the facts about Halley's comet, we understand why it *has* to appear every seventy-six years. The comet doesn't have any say in the matter. An inflexible confluence of causes (mass, gravity, velocity, and so forth) rigidly determines its arrival. The comet is subject to *necessity*. The question thus emerges with some urgency if the same is true for actions. Were we to know all the facts about the Baron's cutting of the lock, or Belinda's refusal of the Baron, would we understand why each had to happen? Pope's language of causes suggests this may be so. Indeed, John Dennis voices precisely this worry in his *Remarks on Mr. Pope's Rape of*

*the Lock* (1728), in which he complains that the word “compel” in line six “is a Botch for the Sake of the Rhyme,” because it “supposes the Baron to be a Beast, and not a free Agent.”<sup>4</sup> Although he is no friend to Pope, Dennis would still like to save the poet from the charge of determinism. Surely Pope didn’t mean to say that the Baron lacked freedom of the will. Pope’s emphasis on causation suggests that Dennis was wrong. The poor Baron may have been just as compelled as the comet, unable to do anything other than cut. He too may have been subject to necessity.<sup>5</sup>

Writers like Dennis worry that necessity is a sort of alibi for reprehensible behavior. Don’t punish me, the Baron might say; I couldn’t have done otherwise. The assumption is that if one isn’t free to choose one’s actions then one can’t really be held responsible for them. The freedom that allows agents to take responsibility for what they do is, on this view, incompatible with the necessity that says they could never have done otherwise. One major contribution of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theories of action was, however, precisely *not* to pose freedom and responsibility against necessity. It was rather to show how the two could be compatible. Traditionally credited to Hobbes, compatibilism of this kind has had great influence up to the present day.<sup>6</sup> The argument works by a series of redefinitions. First among them is freedom itself. “Liberty or Freedom,” Hobbes writes, “signifieth (properly) the absence of Opposition” or “externall Impediments of motion.”<sup>7</sup> On this view, freedom does not refer to an ability to choose or will actions. Rather, freedom refers to an ability to perform actions once they are chosen. While “no Liberty can be inferred of the will, desire, or inclination,” we can infer a “Liberty of the man; which consisteth in this, that he finds no stop, in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to doe” (146). A will may no more be free than a thought may be brittle or a square may be fast. In contrast, an action is free when it may be brought to completion, confined when it is impeded.

This redefinition was useful for Hobbes because it put the freedom of actions together with the safety provided by the state. Absolute

power was not a threat to liberty; rather, it provided the protection for agents to act as they would choose.<sup>8</sup> Despite changes in political theory over the course of the period, the idea that freedom could be compatible with necessity had considerable endurance. Hume for example defined liberty as “a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will” and then argued that this power in no way conflicted with universal causation: “We cannot surely mean, that actions have so little connexion with motives, inclinations, and circumstances, that one does not follow with a certain degree of uniformity from the other, and that one affords no inference by which we can conclude the existence of the other.”<sup>9</sup> Surely, he says, we cannot imagine that the will is indifferent to motives or that motives don’t serve as causes. Liberty requires only that actions may be completed. For Hobbes, the state performs this role by allowing for common safety and enduring contracts; for Hume a society of commerce and reciprocity draws the behavior of one person to the interests of another. In either case, the will finds its place in a lattice of causes, and actions come under the same fine-grained analysis as the rest of nature.

Although the compatibilist account of agency looms large in the history of philosophy, with canonical British writers like Hobbes, Locke, and Hume at front and center, its importance for questions of literary history has not been much explored. One goal of this book is to do just that. The topic of reasons for acting might be of interest for how we think about such things as the writing of literary character and the placing of actions into narratives.<sup>10</sup> Compatibilism in turn might be of help to refining our sense of how dependent characterization was on notions of internal psychology and how far it extended outward into external objects and events. I mentioned earlier, for example, that talk about actions brought mental causes into the world rather than separating them from it. I would add to this thesis that compatibilism brought the world into the mind. As a matter of definition, no cause ever exists on its own. Causes are paired to effects and, presumably, caused by something else too.

With respect to mental states, this means that reasons for acting extend from experiences or desires or intentions to external objects and back. It is not so hard to see how reasons might be internal. The Baron desires that Belinda's hair be cut. Belinda hopes for the Baron to go away. While the lock and the Baron exist independently of the mind, each is at the same time an object of a propositional statement. They change according to the presiding mental verb (or attitude, as we would now say): the lock is cut in the first case, the Baron ushered away in the second.<sup>11</sup> Mental states are thus able to bear content, like a lock of hair, and mediate behavior, like closing a pair of scissors.<sup>12</sup> It is perhaps not quite so easy to see how these same states might reach beyond the person. No small part of my argument, however, will depend on the period's sense of this possibility. In different ways, Hobbes and Hume both say that every event or object or idea links to another in a long chain of causation. There is no way to view any one precisely on its own, since each has antecedents and effects. With respect to mental states, the result of this intuition is that ideas and intentions ultimately make their way to the social and physical environment. When this relation tightens some, the social or physical hookup actually plays a causal role in this or that action. In our present example, we need only look at the system of external rules and meanings that jointly govern the behavior of the Baron or Belinda. "Am'rous Causes" reach through things like cards and hair and forms like courtship and epic.

I will be interested in accounts of actions that stress the connection between subjective experience and the environment or that show how the meaning of concepts is fixed on the outside or that tie volitional states like desire or intention to physical states like the movement of particles. I will argue in other words for the importance of what I'll call *externalism* in the literature and philosophy of the period.<sup>13</sup> In many of the cases I look at, the emphasis fell on causation as the means by which mental states or properties have at once a real existence and are looped into other things. Even as causation promised to join mind to the world, however, the

precise relation between the two became subject to some worry. The question here—the second on my earlier list—was whether mental states instigate physical change. One might be surprised if they didn't.<sup>14</sup> Pope's question about the Baron would only make sense, after all, were his motives able to bring about his cuttings. Yet for all the apparent simplicity of this sort of episode, it became clear to a variety of writers that the process was difficult to pin down. Here are Locke's droll comments on the matter:

My right Hand writes, whilst my left Hand is still: What causes rest in one, and motion in the other? Nothing but my Will,—a Thought of my Mind; my Thought only changing, the right Hand rests, and the left Hand moves. This is matter of fact, which cannot be denied: Explain this, and make it intelligible, and then the next step will be to understand Creation.<sup>15</sup>

Locke's hand has been writing for some time. It has been forming letters from ink, words from letters, sentences from words, and paragraphs from sentences. The paragraphs read as more than accidents. They make a certain sense and so seem to be the product of an intending agent. Try as he might, however, Locke cannot exactly describe how his will executes the writing. (I can't either. I'm telling myself to type this on the keyboard. So far my fingers are moving as I'd like them to. How and why are beyond me.) Locke does not dismiss the efficacy of mental properties or consign them to a separate kind of substance.<sup>16</sup> Rather, he considers the causal relation between will and writing to be "a matter of fact" and to be an example of a kind of relation that underpins every single act done with deliberate intention. His amused caution has to do with figuring out how the pieces of the causal puzzle fit into each other. Does the relation between will and hand-movement have the same features as the one between, say, heat and the evaporation of water? The evaporation of water from heat happens every time the temperature crosses a certain threshold. The turning of letters into words happens by fits and starts, according to a will described as a distinc-

tively mental property. Locke is therefore sure of two things: that he experiences the decision to move one hand and then the other, and that his experience causes the movement of his hands. There is something that it feels like for him to will hand movement. There is nothing that it feels like for heat to evaporate water. In the face of this sort of relation, however, Locke (as it were) throws up his hands. He knows it exists yet cannot provide an intelligible description of how it happens. Analytic philosophers would call this a problem of mental causation.<sup>17</sup> It is essential to every chapter of the book.

Mental causation is so important because without it there would be no concept of agency and no description of actions, only events. It is important because the scene that Locke provides an expository accounting of here reappears in different guises across the literatures of the period, from the search into the “am’rous Causes” beneath and before the rape of the lock to the prolonged questioning of the motives of a character like Clarissa Harlowe in doing things like writing to Lovelace and leaving her family home. It is important finally because of the very bafflement Locke so limpidly voices. Attempts to resolve the problem of mental causation came in a variety of forms: from the idea that mental states or properties might have no causal role to play—*epiphenomenalism* as it is now called—to the notion that external objects and events do the causing for us; from accounts of the mind’s free and independent force on the material world to a recognition that causal relations are best inferred from an outsider’s stance. The pleasure in considering this problem over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has not, however, been in watching a single answer take shape from the various responses. It has been rather in following the arguments as they take off from their several sources, from Hobbes to Hume, Rochester to Richardson, and in between.

At the heart of the problem of mental causation is the distinction, if there is one, between mind and matter. For most of the writers I consider, the causal relation at issue is not one between two kinds of substance. For some the distinction is between mental and physical



description, with the underlying substance question ruled out by metaphysical fiat; for others the problem is fitting the mind into a world that is wholly material; for still others a ghost does in fact haunt the machine. The concerns raised by these responses take me to the last of the three questions I raised earlier. Were we to ask who cut Belinda's hair we would think it odd if someone were to reply the scissors. Why would we think so? On a first pass, we might say because the Baron is a person and the scissors an object. We might then hang a series of further distinctions on this difference. Persons have a kind of value and set of rights, for example, while objects do not. Junk the Baron's scissors and he might be annoyed, but you're unlikely to be arrested. Drown the Baron in the Thames and you might be held accountable for a crime. The concept of person is, as Locke will say, a "forensic category," useful for the assigning of blame or praise, reward or punishment.<sup>18</sup> But to say that persons cause things to happen and objects do not is to take as a premise the difference in roles one is trying to explain. Why then do we say that a person has causal powers while a pair of scissors does not? For many during the period the answer was that persons have conscious experience.<sup>19</sup> There is something that it is like to be the Baron.<sup>20</sup> There is nothing that it is like to be a pair of scissors. Here we can perhaps take matters no further. A person is a kind of thing that is conscious; a pair of scissors is a kind of thing that is not. Full stop.

The premise of this sort of argument is actually twofold. It says that persons have consciousness *and* that consciousness distinguishes one person from another. This claim is made with tremendous influence in chapter 27 of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). For Locke and others, talk of consciousness was hard to have without talk of personal identity, and likewise bringing up personal identity was hard to do without having something to say about consciousness. One linked series of conscious moments wraps the whole into a single entity, making (as the case may be) the young Locke an identical person to the old one. If consciousness and personhood go together, however, they do

so with some interesting points of tension. For some writers, including Locke on occasion, consciousness was something that bodies have and do. It was not a separate substance put into them. But how can a physical system be the locus of experience? Matter seems by definition to be without experience, yet put together in certain ways it gives rise to sentience, awareness, pleasure, pain, appetites, and the like. In contemporary work on the mind, the question of how this is possible is known as “the hard problem of consciousness,” and it remains decisively unanswered to this day.<sup>21</sup> Following a single thread in the treatment of actions has thus backed me into a large area of concern, one that I try to keep tightly laced to reasons for acting. This topic includes consciousness because it is conscious objects that would seem to have reasons. How precisely that is so, however, does take us into really interesting and difficult issues.

One such issue comes directly out of the seventeenth and eighteenth century’s version of today’s “hard problem.” It went something like this: assuming that material entities are able to have the sort of experiences that lead to actions—conscious reasons for acting, let’s say—why are some entities conscious and others not? At bottom, there is little difference between the Baron and the scissors (or the comet). Each is a composite of particles. Yet Baron-particles give rise to consciousness and scissor-particles do not. In the chapters that follow, I will look at a few works that directly ask why that is so. Once again, my interest is not only with period-defining answers but also with some difficulties encountered along the way. I am especially drawn to texts that come at problems of consciousness from an oblique angle or that offer radical or at least off-center responses to the problems at hand. I’ll be interested in texts that try to bring consciousness and personhood together, but I will also be interested in those that pry them apart, that present conscious experiences without a person having them or persons without conscious experiences in train. I’ll be interested, finally, in texts willing to follow their premises to seemingly unusual conclusions, such as all things having some sort of consciousness or (conversely) nothing having consciousness at all.