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Dummett on Bringing about the Past[1]

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Abstract: My intention in this paper is to outline and criticise some of the main ideas and arguments in Michael Dummett's classic article "Bringing about the Past". In his article, Dummett sketches and criticises two sceptical arguments designed to show that it can never be rational to attempt to bring about past events. Though happy with Dummett's reply to the first sceptical argument, I am critical of his reply to the second argument.

Keywords: Dummett; fatalism; backwards causation; bringing about the past

1. INTRODUCTION

Michael Dummett's 1964 paper "Bringing about the Past" has not, I think, received the detailed attention that it deserves. One of my aims in this discussion is to make clear why Dummett's paper deserves more consideration today. Although the topic of backwards causation may seem an esoteric one, it intersects with central topics in metaphysics (time, causation) and in epistemology (rationality, reasons for acting). Indeed, as we shall we see, Dummett's concerns in his paper are more epistemic than metaphysical.

I take Dummett's paper to fall into three parts. The first is introductory, opening with some remarks about causation in general and backwards causation in particular. Dummett assumes that backwards causation is possible, understood as a thesis in metaphysics. However, the

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central concern of his paper lies elsewhere. Dummett's key question is: Can agents have a reason to bring about past events, in worlds where there are, or are justifiably believed to be, humanly manipulable backwards causal chains? Dummett's (eventual) answer is: Yes, we can make sense of an agent's having a reason to bring about a past event, understood as a thesis in epistemology.

However, Dummett is aware of the *prima facie* absurdity of this answer, and, more importantly, of two sceptical arguments against such an answer. The first sceptical argument attempts to show that it is pointless to attempt to affect past events that we brought about since any given past event has already either happened or not. Dummett's reply to this argument is that it cannot be cogent since it is the mirror image of a standard argument for fatalism. Since we reject the latter argument we should reject the former too.

The second sceptical argument is more complex, exploiting the fact that we can have intention-independent knowledge of the occurrence of past events, including (it would appear) past events that we bring about. Such knowledge might seem to undermine our reasons to bring about past events. Dummett's reply to this second argument is a radical one, and, I think, untenable. Fortunately, another reply is available.

2. DUMMETT'S INTRODUCTORY REMARKS: SETTING THE SCENE

Dummett begins by conceding that in our world causation has a genuine (objective or language-independent) direction: from earlier events to later ones. Even though he thinks, as many do, that the concept of cause is bound up with the concept of intentional action (of agents deliberately bringing about events), he holds that a mere observer—e.g., an intelligent tree—could form "some kind of concept of cause" though not the full-blown one we have.[2] And it would, in our world, be the concept of a temporally asymmetric relation. Nonetheless, and provided that we imagine ourselves to be mere observers, we can conceive of worlds in which some causation runs in the later-to-earlier direction. Indeed, since we are mere observers of the motion of the planets, it could have turned

[2] M. Dummett, "Bringing About the Past," *The Philosophical Review* 71 (1964): 338.

out that such motion involved backwards causation and backwards causal laws.[3]

However, when we move from considering ourselves as observers to considering ourselves as agents, the idea of backwards causation seems absurd. For it ought then to be possible to do something now in order that something should have happened in the past, and this seems incoherent. It " ... apparently follows that backwards causation must ... be absurd in any realm in which we can operate as agents".[4] But why do we think there is an absurdity here? Is it merely a prejudice?

One argument for thinking it absurd assumes that attempting to affect the past involves changing the past; and since the latter is impossible, so is the former. (Of course, if cogent, this argument would rule out backwards causation itself, whether or not agents were present.) But it is generally agreed that this reasoning is confused. In doing A to bring about the earlier B, I have made it the case that B occurred, but I have not changed the past. If B occurred at that earlier time, it always was and always will be true that it occurred then. Nothing that occurred at that time was changed, nor could it be. It is logically impossible that B both occurred and didn't occur. But doing A to bring about the earlier B does not imply that absurd consequence.

As Dummett notes, orthodox Jewish theologians thought that retrospective prayer involved a logical impossibility, and that such prayer therefore mocked God. Dummett gives an example of retrospective prayer: a father prays that his son was one of the survivors in a ship that went down a few hours previously. But, as Dummett rightly points out, we don't have to interpret the father as asking God to do the impossible (to make the drowned son not have drowned). Rather, we can interpret the father as asking God to make it the case that his son was among the survivors, and this is not asking for the logically impossible. Dummett interprets this case, not as one in which the father's prayer directly brings about the survival of his son, but as one in which God has foreknowledge that the father will pray and, as a result, ensures that his son is among the survivors.

[3] Ibid., 340.
[4] Ibid., 340.

Having introduced the case of retrospective prayer, Dummett then outlines the first sceptical argument against the rationality of attempts to bring about the past. This argument does not draw on the theological aspect of the prayer example but applies quite generally to any attempt to causally influence the past.

3. THE FIRST SCEPTICAL ARGUMENT

The first sceptical argument runs as follows:

> Suppose someone were to say to [the father], "Either your son has drowned or he has not. If he has drowned, then certainly your prayer will not (cannot) be answered. If he has not drowned, your prayer is superfluous. So in either case your prayer is pointless: it cannot make any difference to whether he has drowned or not."[5]

The first point that Dummett makes is that this argument seems to be the "exact analogue" of one of the standard arguments for fatalism, popular in London during the bombing, *viz*.,:

> The siren sounds, and I set off for the air-raid shelter in order to avoid being killed by a bomb. The fatalist argues, "Either you are going to be killed by a bomb or you are not going to be. If you are, then any precautions you take will be ineffective. If you are not, all precautions you take are superfluous. Therefore it is pointless to take precautions." This belief was extended even to particular bombs. If a bomb was going to kill me, then it "had my number on it," and there was no point in my attempting to take precautions against being killed by that bomb; if it did not have my number on it, then of course precautions were pointless too.[6]

Dummett's thought is that since we regard the fatalist's argument as sophistical, so too should we regard the first sceptical argument. Now Dummett concedes that some may not regard the arguments as exact analogues precisely because of the difference in tense. This opens up a

[5] Ibid., 344-345.
[6] Ibid., 345.

way of replying to the fatalist's argument which is not applicable to the sceptical argument, *viz*., denying the first premise. Thus, on some theories of time which deny the reality of the future, future contingent statements, such as 'you will be killed by a bomb', are not true or false. They are indeterminate in truth-value. If we wish to adhere to the classical principle that a disjunction is true only if at least one of its disjuncts is true, such theories imply that the first premise of the fatalist argument is not true. Of course, this means denying the universal validity of the Law of Excluded Middle, but some defenders of the unreality of the future may be happy to accept this consequence (as Dummett himself does, on quite different grounds). But, given the reality of the past, there is no analogous way of denying the first premise of the sceptical argument.

Dummett gives this reply short shrift. He retorts that " ... the fatalist argument can be reconstructed by replacing the opening tautology by the assertion, "Either the statement 'You will be killed in this raid' is going to become true, or it is going to become false."[7] This retort is unconvincing. Any defender of the reasoning outlined in the previous paragraph will maintain that neither "'You will be killed in this raid' is going to become true" nor "'You will be killed in this raid' is going to become false" is (now) true, since neither outcome is currently determined. These expanded disjuncts are as indeterminate as the originals they replace.

However, leaving this dispute to one side, the two arguments are analogous in another respect. The premises of both arguments are presented as necessary *a priori* truths. Yet, intuitively, the second and third premises of each argument are not necessarily true. Dummett's discussion at this point is unfortunately somewhat opaque.[8] J.H. Sobel's discussion clarifies matters.[9] For a different interpretation, see the articles by Stalnaker[10] and Bledin.[11]

Consider the second premise of the fatalist's argument: "If you are going to be killed, then any precautions you take will be ineffective." If you are going to be killed, then of course whatever precautions you actually

[7] Ibid., 346
[8] Ibid., 346-348.
[9] J.H. Sobel, "Dummett on Fatalism," *The Philosophical Review* 73 (1966).
[10] R. Stalnaker, "Indicative Conditionals," *Philosophia* 5 (1975).
[11] J. Bledin, "Fatalism and the Logic of Unconditionals," *Nous*, forthcoming.

take will be (will have been) ineffective in preventing your death. But it does not follow that there are no precautions such that, had you taken them, you would not have been killed. If there are such life-saving precautions, taking them would have been effective, so not pointless. Hence, it does not follow that all precautions are necessarily ineffective, which is what the fatalist needs and intends.

Consider the third premise of the fatalist's argument: "If you are not going to be killed, all precautions you take are superfluous." This is not a necessary truth. It is not necessarily true that if you are not killed, all precautions you took were superfluous. On the contrary, it may be that you were not killed precisely because you took precautions. Superfluity is a counterfactual notion. Precautions were superfluous just if you would (still) not have been killed, had you not taken them. But this counterfactual is obviously not a necessary truth, and presumably was often false during the Second World War and at other times. Sometimes precautions are superfluous, but sometimes they are not.

Consequently, the fatalist's argument is defective, whatever the correct theory of time. But the sceptical argument contains analogous premises and is flawed for the same reason. Thus, e.g., the son may have been saved precisely because the father prayed. Hence, the first sceptical argument against the rationality or reasonableness of attempting to bring about the past fails. It is to Dummett's credit that he makes visible this failure.

4. THE SECOND SCEPTICAL ARGUMENT

In order to introduce the second sceptical argument Dummett replaces his theological example with a magical one. He writes:

> Every second year the young men of the tribe are sent, as part of their initiation ritual, on a lion hunt: they have to prove their manhood. They travel for two days, hunt lions for two days, and spend two days on the return journey; observers go with them, and report to the chief upon their return whether the young men acquitted themselves with bravery or not. The people of the tribe believe that various ceremonies, carried out by the chief, influence the weather, the crops, and so forth. I do not want these ceremonies to be thought of as religious rites, intended to

> dispose the gods favourably towards them, but simply as performed on the basis of a wholly mistaken system of causal beliefs. While the young men are away from the village the chief performs ceremonies - dances, let us say - intended to cause the young men to act bravely. We notice that he continues to perform these dances for the whole six days that the party is away, that is to say, for two days during which the events that the dancing is supposed to influence have already taken place. Now there is generally thought to be a special absurdity in the idea of affecting the past, much greater than the absurdity of believing that the performance of a dance can influence the behavior of a man two days' journey away; so we ought to be able to persuade the chief of the absurdity of his continuing to dance after the first four days without questioning his general system of causal beliefs. How are we going to do it?[12]

So, is there a special absurdity in the idea of an agent attempting to affect the past, over and above any absurdity inherent in the idea of backwards causation itself? Dummett approaches this question by posing a more specific one: *viz*., Can we persuade the chief of the irrationality of his post-hunt dancing? Let us grant that the chief has best possible grounds to believe that his dancing is causally efficacious. That is, suppose that on every occasion when he danced on the last two days, the men were brave, and on every occasion when he didn't dance, the men were cowardly. Further, the chief has never tried to dance and been unable to do so (for no explicable reason). Hence, there is no temptation to think that the men's bravery causes his dancing or that their cowardice renders him incapable of dancing.

How then are we to challenge the chief's belief? Dummett takes it as obvious that if the chief somehow knew, prior to dancing, that the men were brave, he would have no reason to dance. Let us suppose, therefore, that we arrange for information to reach the chief (e.g., by portable telephone) after the men have fought but prior to his post-hunt dancing. We then invite the chief not to dance when told that the men were brave, and to dance when told that they were not brave. Suppose he does so and,

[12] M. Dummett, "Bringing About the Past," 349-349.

immediately after, we say "Well, you must see that you have no reason to dance. Your dancing is not causally efficacious after all." However, suppose it later turns out that on all the occasions on which the chief was told the men were brave and didn't dance, and on which he was told the men were cowardly and did dance, he was misinformed (the observers lied or were mistaken). Our challenge has failed. The correlations between dancing and bravery, and between non-dancing and cowardice, instead of being undermined, have been reinforced.

Dummett concedes that, if this is how things turn out, we have not convinced the chief that it is irrational to dance. But the experiment has a further consequence. It has made the chief realise that he cannot trust the reports of observers. So he concludes that he can only know, prior to dancing, that the young men were brave through knowledge of his intention to dance. In this way, his knowledge of the men's bravery is exactly parallel to the knowledge that we have of the intended effects of our own future actions. For example, I know that I will be home tonight *via* knowledge of my current intention to catch my usual train.

Thus, in order to maintain the rationality of his belief in the causal efficacy of his dancing, the chief must give up a belief about the past that we all find natural, *viz*., the belief " … that it is possible for me to find out what has happened (whether the young men have been brave or not) independently of my intentions."[13] Now, says Dummett, we have an exact parallel with cases of affecting the future since:

> [w]e never combine the beliefs (i) that an action A is positively correlated with the subsequent occurrence of an event B; (ii) that the action A is in my power to perform or not as I choose; and (iii) that I can know whether B is going to take place or not independently of my intention to perform or not to perform the action A. The difference between past and future lies in this: that we think that, of any past event, it is in principle possible for me to know whether or not it took place independently of my present intentions; whereas, for many types of future event, we should

[13] Ibid., 356-357.

> admit that we are never going to be in a position to have such knowledge independently of our intentions.[14]

The upshot is that we cannot convict the chief of irrationality, if things turn out as described above. More generally, provided we are willing to give up the principle that we can have intention-independent knowledge of events that we backwardly cause (a principle we relinquish in the case of events that we forwardly cause), it can be rational to attempt to bring about the past. Hence, in worlds in which there are manipulable backwards causal chains, it can be rational to use them to bring about past events just as we use future-directed causal chains to bring about future events in this world.

We are now in a position to state the second sceptical argument and Dummett's response to it. The second sceptical argument, addressed to the chief but general in its application, is this:

> (i) If you can have intention-independent knowledge, prior to dancing, of the men's bravery, you have no reason to dance.
> (ii) You can have intention-independent knowledge, prior to dancing, of the men's bravery; so
> (iii) You have no reason to dance.

Dummett's response to this (obviously valid) argument is to endorse premise (i) but to deny premise (ii).

Dummett's overall conclusion, therefore, is that there are possible circumstances in which it is rational to attempt to bring about the past, provided we are prepared to give up the principle that we can have intention-independent knowledge of the occurrence of events that we backwardly cause.

5. CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Since I agree with Dummett's reply to the first sceptical argument, my critical comments will focus on the second sceptical argument and Dummett's response to it. The two key questions are: (a) Is Dummett

[14] Ibid., 357.

right to endorse premise (i)?; (b) Is Dummett right to reject premise (ii)? After addressing these questions, I end with some concluding remarks in section (c).

(a) It's fair to say that Dummett offers no argument for premise (i). In fact, Dummett endorses the slightly different principle:

> (i*) If you have intention-independent knowledge, prior to dancing, of the men's bravery, you have no reason to dance.

On the face of it, (i*) does not imply (i). Could one not hold that intention-independent knowledge is reason-undermining, but that the mere possibility of such knowledge is not (i.e., cases where you might, but do not, have such knowledge)? After all, it may be said, what you have reason to do, at least in one sense of 'reason', depends on what you know or believe. However, since the falsity of (i*) implies the falsity of (i), I will try to show that (i*) is false and, hence, so is (i).

Dummett takes it as obvious that once the chief " … *knows* whether the young men have been brave or not … there is no longer any point in trying to bring it about that they have been".[15] Similar sentiments were expressed in an earlier symposium with Anthony Flew. There Dummett wrote, using a different example but to the same effect:

> What is true is that if the magician *knows* that the weather was fine on the date in question, he will not bother to recite the spell; and if he knows that it was not fine, he will not recite it either … Here it is of no consequence that this argument too can be paralleled for the future. It is of course true that if anyone *knew* whether or not something was going to happen, he would do nothing now designed to make it happen, for this would be either redundant or fruitless … [16]

In these quotes we can assume that Dummett has in mind intention-independent knowledge, although this was not clearly formulated in the

[15] Ibid., 349.

[16] M. Dummett, "Can an Effect Precede its Cause?," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 28 (1954): 41.

1954 article. Flew objects to Dummett's claim that knowledge is reason-undermining. Unfortunately, his counterexample involves intention-dependent knowledge. Imagining a Headmaster about to punish an errant schoolboy, Flew observes that " … if the Headmaster knows what he is going to do to Smith this does not make his efforts redundant and fruitless."[17] This observation seems correct, but since the Headmaster's knowledge is presumably intention-dependent (i.e., acquired *via* knowledge of his intention to cane Smith) it is no objection to Dummett's considered view.

However, it may be possible to re-interpret Flew's example so that it is a counterexample. Suppose that the Headmaster knows that Smith is sitting outside his office at 5pm on Friday, knows that boys sitting outside his office at 5pm on Friday are caned, and so infers that Smith will be caned. Intuitively, the Headmaster's intention-independent knowledge that Smith will be caned does not undermine his reason to cane Smith. Here is another example: I travel home every night by train. Suppose that I know, *via* induction from previous nights, that I will arrive home tonight. Although intention-independent, that knowledge does not undermine my reason to catch tonight's train.

These examples show that Dummett was wrong to endorse (i*): intention-independent knowledge is not, or at least not always, reason-undermining. (Hence, Dummett is also wrong to suggest in the quote cited above[18] that we never combine the three beliefs he mentions. We do.) Note that in these counterexamples I assume that the Headmaster and I have forgotten our relevant intentions, so that our knowledge is indeed intention-independent. Alternatively, our knowledge might be over-determined. Perhaps the Headmaster knows *via* his intention that he will cane Smith and knows by induction that he will do so. Even so, the second way of knowing has no tendency to undermine the Headmaster's reason to cane Smith.

Since (i*), and hence (i), are false, the door is now open to a different response to the second sceptical argument: reject premise (i).

[17] A. Flew, "Can an Effect Precede its Cause?," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 28 (1954): 61.

[18] M. Dummett, "Bringing About the Past," 357.

(b) What of premise (ii)? Since premise (i) is false it is, of course, not necessary to reject premise (ii) in order to avoid the conclusion (iii). Still, is Dummett's rejection of premise (ii) plausible or even coherent? It is natural to think that agents can, in principle, have knowledge of past events, including knowledge of past events they bring about, independently of knowledge of their intentions. Yet this is what Dummett denies in order to make room for the idea that an agent can have a reason to bring about a past event. The only scenario, according to Dummett, in which the chief can have reason to dance is one in which he cannot know, independently of knowledge of his intention to dance, that the young men were brave. There was, it will be recalled, a reason for this. The chief realised that he could not trust the reports of his observers, so concluded that he could only know that the men were brave *via* knowledge of his intention to dance. But does this conclusion follow and is it tenable?

According to Dummett, the chief has a reason to dance provided he cannot have intention-independent knowledge of the men's bravery prior to his dancing. Now it is typical of past events to leave myriad future traces. Suppose that the men fought bravely and that information to that effect was spread in many ways into the future: by testimony, memory, newspaper reports and so on. This information presumably constitutes knowledge for the observers and many others—they can know that the men were brave—but such information cannot constitute knowledge for the chief, according to Dummett. This is hard to believe.

Moreover, even if the chief decides that he cannot trust the reports of others, what if he was to witness the men fighting bravely?[19] Should he discount that information too? Does the chief's own perceptual information not constitute knowledge for him? (What of a different case where the chief's dancing caused him to have had a headache the previous Wednesday? Could he not have intention-independent knowledge of his own headache prior to dancing?) Another problem: can the chief have intention-independent knowledge that the men were brave after he has danced? It would seem so. Yet this implies the oddity that the same item of information, say a newspaper report, may constitute knowledge for the chief after he dances but not before.

[19] See S. Gorovitz, "Leaving the Past Alone," *The Philosophical Review* 73 (1964).

There is another, more extreme, possibility. Perhaps the men's bravery has no causal consequences at all and thus yields no information for anyone. Knowledge of the men's bravery, even *via* perception or memory, is therefore impossible for anyone. This would underwrite Dummett's epistemic restriction but at the cost of removing backwardly caused events from the causal swim (they are caused but uncausing). This consequence is metaphysically bizarre and makes such events forever unknowable. This is too high a price to pay in order to make sense of bringing about the past.

The upshot is that the chief was too quick to move to the conclusion that he could only know that the men were brave *via* knowledge of his intention to dance, and Dummett was wrong to endorse this conclusion. Moreover, the conclusion is, if not incoherent, completely at odds with our understanding of the world and our ways of knowing about it. Dummett's project, after all, is to find out whether we can accommodate the idea of agents bringing about the past in ways recognisable to us, involving minimal distortion of our own conceptual scheme. Hence Dummett's emphasis on the need to draw a moral for our own case from the example of the dancing chief.[20] Dummett was, I submit, wrong to reject premise (ii). We should accept (ii).

(c) Is that then the end of the matter? Is the second sceptical argument flawed because premise (i) is false? The counterexamples to premise (i) involved knowledge acquired by inductive reasoning. But much of our knowledge of past events is direct, where direct knowledge of an event's occurrence can be defined as knowledge that derives causally from that event. Thus, e.g., my reading in this morning's newspaper that the Raiders won last night's game is direct knowledge; my knowledge that the sun will rise tomorrow is indirect. Perhaps we can improve on the second sceptical argument by replacing Dummett's intention-independent/intention-dependent distinction with the direct/indirect distinction. This may yield a better argument.

We should therefore consider the following (third) sceptical argument, again addressed to the chief:

[20] M. Dummett, "Bringing About the Past," 351.

(1) If you can have direct knowledge, prior to dancing, of the men's bravery, you have no reason to dance.
(2) You can have direct knowledge, prior to dancing, of the men's bravery; so
(3) You have no reason to dance.

Since denying premise (2) is not an option, for the reasons given in the previous section, the question is whether premise (1) is more plausible than premise (i). Unlike (i), it is hard to think of uncontroversial cases in which direct knowledge is not reason-undermining (unsurprisingly, perhaps, since we lack direct knowledge of future events).

Suppose that the chief has direct knowledge that the men were brave. Might he reason to himself: "I know that the men were brave; so the men were brave. That fact is not going to change. So it will still be true that the men were brave if I refrain from dancing. So I have no reason to dance." He might so reason, but it looks suspiciously similar to the reasoning of the fatalist. Suppose I have knowledge (in the normal way or by induction) that I will be home tonight. Then I might reason: "I know that I will be home tonight; so I will be home tonight. That fact is not going to change. So it will still be true that I will be home tonight if I refrain from catching my usual train. So I have no reason to catch my train." This reasoning strikes us as sophistical, yet it is the analogue of the chief's reasoning. Where does it go wrong?

First, the reasoning assumes that the natural language indicative conditional is material and hence that from any proposition 'p' we can derive 'if q then p' ("if the men were brave then if I refrain from dancing it will still be the case that the men were brave"). But it is controversial to hold that the indicative conditional is material. The principle 'if p then if q then p' is, after all, often referred to as 'the paradox of material implication'. Many would gibe at the idea that, e.g., "if Trump wins the next election then, if his opponent wins, Trump wins" is a tautology.

Second, even if we grant that the indicative conditional is material, the fatalist conclusion does not follow. The diagnosis is by now familiar. I have no reason to catch my train in order to arrive home just if catching my train is superfluous with respect to achieving this end. But superfluity, as noted earlier, is a counterfactual notion: catching my train is superfluous just if, were I not to catch my train, I would still arrive home

tonight. But we may have good reason to think this counterfactual false. Nor does it follow from the tautology (if it is a tautology) that if I arrive home tonight then if I don't catch my train, I arrive home tonight. (Indeed, how could it? Tautologies only imply tautologies.) The same diagnosis applies to the chief's imagined chain of reasoning.

It might be replied that I am not comparing like with like. Consider a world in which I have direct knowledge of future events. Would a fatalist attitude not be justified here? Suppose my crystal ball affords me direct knowledge that the President will be assassinated next Tuesday. Does such knowledge mean that the assassination is unpreventable? No, what follows from my knowledge, if it is knowledge, is only that it will not be prevented. It is a fatalist fallacy to think that if an event will not be prevented, it cannot be prevented (or, equivalently, that if an event will happen, it must happen).

Hence, a natural and tempting argument for premise (1) is fallacious, and it is the mirror-image of the fatalist's reasoning. Pending some compelling defence of premise (1), and I cannot think of one, we are free to reject that premise and thus leave room for the idea that we can, in appropriate circumstances, have reason to bring about past events. So I agree with Dummett that we should reject the conclusion of the second and third sceptical arguments. We differ over which premise to reject.

Thus, at the end of this discussion, I am in broad agreement with Dummett. It is no more unreasonable for agents to make use of backwards causal chains in order to achieve their ends than it is for us to make use of forward causal chains to achieve our ends. I think that opposition to this conclusion has to take the form of a blank denial of the possibility of backwards causation. It would be odd, instead, to allow that backwards causation is possible, but not in the presence of agents; or that backwards causation is possible in the presence of agents, but that agents could never initiate backwards causal chains; or that they could initiate such chains (as mere causes), but could never have any reason to do so. It seems essential to the idea that A-type events cause B-type events that if an agent wants to bring about a B-type event, and has it within his power to bring about an A-type event, then he has reason to do so. The upshot is that anyone who wants to disagree with Dummett's overall conclusion, e.g., someone who endorses both premises of the third sceptical argument, had better maintain that backwards causation is impossible.

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