

Doing/Allowing and Seeing Oneself as an Agent

Abstract

My argument is inspired by Samuel Scheffler's paper "Doing and Allowing". Morality must hold agents more responsible for what they do than for what they merely allow. An agent, to see himself as such, must distinguish between primary and secondary manifestations of his agency and hold himself particularly responsible for primary manifestations of his agency. Morality requires agents to see themselves as agents. Thus morality requires agents to see themselves as more responsible for primary manifestations of their agency than secondary manifestations. The things an agent does are primary manifestations of his agency; those he merely allows are secondary manifestations. Therefore, morality requires agents to see themselves as more responsible for the things they do than those they merely allow. Therefore, morality must hold agents more responsible for what they do than for what they allow.

Key Words: The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing; Samuel Scheffler; Philippa Foot

The argument in this paper owes much to Samuel Scheffler's article "Doing and Allowing".¹ Like Scheffler, I argue that anyone who sees himself as subject to the demands of morality must have a view of his own agency that distinguishes between different consequences of his actions. He must see himself as more responsible for "primary manifestations of his agency" than "secondary manifestations of agency". Thus morality itself presupposes a distinction such as the doing/allowing distinction.

My argument differs significantly from Scheffler's in two ways: first, I give a different argument for the view that seeing oneself as an agent involves drawing a distinction between the primary and secondary manifestations of

¹ Scheffler (2004)

one's agency. Secondly, while Scheffler argues only that we need attribute normative significance to "some distinction of this sort", I seek to find a justification for the moral relevance of the doing/allowing distinction itself.

Morality and Agency

To be an agent, one must fulfil three fundamental conditions. First, an agent must *do* something. There must be something that it is appropriate to call the agent's behaviour. Second, the agent must *change* something. There must be features of the way the world is that can be attributed to the way the agent behaves. Third, an agent must *aim* at something. There must be something that the agent wishes to achieve by his action. If a creature does not fulfil all of these conditions, he is not really an agent. A creature that affects the world, but does so without intending any particular effect, is a merely a junction in the causal grid. A creature that simply impotently aims, that has goals but no behaviour or no way of achieving his goals, is just a disconnected will. Neither of these creatures is an agent.

There must also be an appropriate connection between the agent's will, his behaviour and his effect on the world. An agent acts to achieve his ends; it must be *by his actions* that the desired effect on the world comes about; it must be *in order to achieve the desired effect* that he behaves as he does. To count as the action of an agent, his behaviour must be connected to both his will and the external world. The agent chooses to behave as he does due to his aims and his appreciation of the way in which his behaviour can affect the world.

Thus, if a person is to see himself as an agent, he must see himself as a force that acts upon the external world in order to fulfil his aims or purposes. When he does so, he sees certain features of the state of the world as the results of his actions. He has a special relationship with these aspects of the world; they are not merely part of the current state of affairs. Instead, these aspects of the world are distinctively *his*. These features of the way things are can be thought of as impressions left on the world by his activities. They are *manifestations of his agency*.² As such they are attributable to him in a way no

² I borrow this term from Scheffler (2004).

other features of the world are. The recognition of the manifestations of one's agency is part of seeing oneself as an agent.

A moral theory that does not respect a person's special relationship to the manifestations of his agency does not allow that person to see himself as an agent. A morality that treats a subject as an agent when it asks him to constrain his conduct according to its rules, but does not respect his view of himself as an agent in the content of those rules is deeply incoherence.

As Scheffler argues, morality itself presupposes that the moral agent should view himself as an agent. The demands of morality are presented to an agent as constraints on his conduct, reasons to act in one way rather than in another. However, for him to see himself as subject to such demands is to adopt a specific view of himself and his behaviour. In Scheffler's words: "the very fact that one acknowledges a practical reason presupposes that one sees oneself as a subject, a locus of agency, who is charged with the task of exercising that agency in accordance with reasons of some kind."³

Only beings whose behaviour flows from their will can respond to practical reasons; a being whose behaviour was disconnected from his aims could not be brought to change that behaviour by being shown that he had reason to do so. Only beings whose behaviour has some effect have such reasons; if how a creature behaves has no effect whatsoever then surely he can have no reason to behave in one way rather than the other. The demands of practical reason, and more specifically the demands of morality, can only be addressed to us *as* agents. It is only in so far as we recognise our own agency that we can recognise the demands of morality.

For this reason, there will be a fundamental incoherence in a morality that does not allow its subjects to see themselves as agents and attach special significance to their own agency. Insofar as the morality presents its dictates as demands of practical reason, it presupposes that its subjects view themselves as agents; insofar as the contents of those demands prevent the subject from seeing himself as an agent, it contradicts this supposition.

³ Scheffler (2004), p. 224

Scheffler finds an additional connection between an agent's holding himself to a moral norm and his attaching a special significance to his conduct. Scheffler adopts R. Jay Wallace's understanding of what it is to hold someone to a moral norm. For Scheffler and Wallace, holding an agent to a moral norm involves seeing him as having reason to conform to these standards and as an appropriate subject of reactive attitudes, such as blame, if he fails to do so.⁴ Insofar as the agent holds himself to norms, he will see himself as blameworthy when he fails to live up to those norms. He must see it as his responsibility not to be blameworthy, not to act against the norms. In accepting this responsibility, the agent draws a normative difference between bad things that happen and his behaving badly. It is unfortunate if something bad happens, but if he does wrong, he is to blame. This is something he has particular reason to avoid.

This argument does not beg the question against the consequentialist by illegitimately assuming that wrongness and blameworthiness are the same thing.⁵ Instead, it claims that there is an intimate connection between *holding agents to norms* and *seeing agents as blameworthy*. I do not really hold myself to a norm unless I am concerned to avoid being blameworthy for failing to live up to that norm. Because of the connection between holding oneself to norms and seeing oneself as having reason to avoid blame, there are limits on how far violation of moral norms and blameworthiness can come apart. The content of the norms of morality must fit with the conditions necessary to hold oneself to the norms of morality. If holding oneself to moral norms involves seeing oneself as having special reasons to avoid a certain type of conduct, then the norms of morality must recognise this conduct as wrong.

Primary and Secondary Manifestations of Agency

I will now try to show that viewing oneself as an agent involves drawing a distinction between primary and secondary manifestations of one's agency. I argued above that to see oneself as an agent involves acknowledging one's

⁴ See Scheffler (2004), p. 220-224 and Wallace (1996), chaps 1-3.

⁵ I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

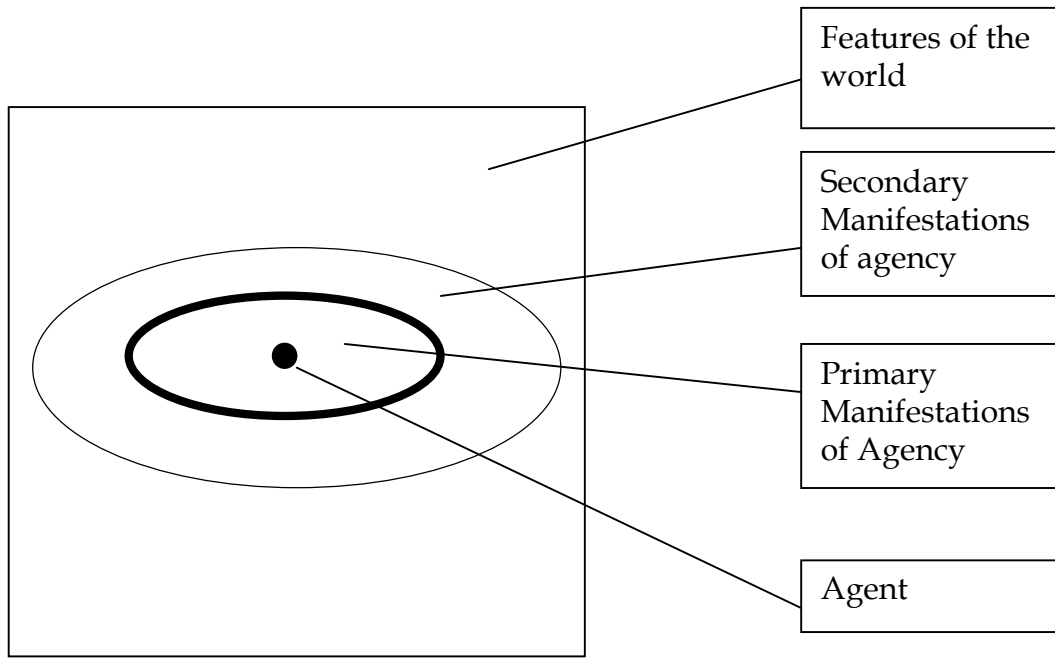
special relationship to certain features of the world. These are the manifestations of one's agency. Part of seeing oneself as an agent is recognising the manifestations of one's agency.

The manifestations of a given agent's agency are the features of the world in which his agency is implicated, aspects of the world that reflect his will. We then divide the manifestations of agency into two sets. In "Doing and Allowing", Scheffler introduces the phrase "primary and secondary manifestations of agency."⁶ In the primary manifestations of agency, his agency is implicated particularly strongly. In the secondary manifestations of agency, his agency is not so strongly implicated □ if it is really implicated at all. We can illustrate this using the following diagram (see Figure 1).

The thin circle around the agent marks the boundary between the manifestations of his agency and other features of the world. However, this circle divides into primary and secondary manifestations of agency. It is only those within the thick circle, the primary manifestations of agency, in which the agent's agency is strongly implicated. I argue that an agent, in order to see himself as such, must make this sort of distinction between primary and secondary manifestations of his agency. He cannot treat all the effects of his behaviour equally, but must regard some as his in a way the others are not.

Figure 1: Manifestations of Agency

⁶ Scheffler (2004), p. 216.



What would it be like to see everything to which one is relevant as a primary manifestation of one's agency? For such an agent, the mere fact that he could have prevented a given upshot will make it attributable to him. Such an agent sees himself as sitting at the centre of an incredibly complex causal web. Every act has innumerable ramifications. Each of these ramifications is traced back to the agent as part of the imprint of the agent's will upon the world. When such an agent sits at the computer, moving his fingers over the keys, the death of a faraway child, who could have been saved by a donation to an aid agency, is just as attributable to him as the words that appear on the screen. There is something wrong with taking this view of one's agency. The agent's understanding of what counts as part of his agency is so expansive that it becomes meaningless. When so much counts as a primary manifestation of agency, it does not seem as if anything really does. There are so many ramifications, so much to take in; the flood of upshots overwhelms any sense of the agent's having an effect on the world. The agent cannot recognise the manifestations of his agency and thus is not able to see himself as an agent.

It might be argued that viewing himself as an agent does not require a person to recognise the manifestations of his agency. A person can know that

he is an agent, a creature that affects the world by modifying his behaviour in response to his aims, without being able to pick out which of the things in the world are the effects of his agency.⁷ I claim that such a person believes that he is an agent, but does not recognise his own agency or view himself as an agent in the sense required. The agential point of view presupposed by morality requires that the person view himself as an agent in a rich sense, which involves not simply admitting that he does affect the world, but recognising his effects on the world. The recognition of himself as an agent presupposed by morality requires that the agent be able to represent the manifestations of agency to himself in a way he can understand. This recognition is therefore not compatible with an understanding of what counts as part of his agency that is so diffuse that it becomes meaningless.

Primary and Secondary Manifestations of Agency and the Doing/Allowing Distinction

The above considerations suggest that an agent must draw a distinction between the consequences of his agency. Some will be classified as primary manifestations of his agency; he has a particular responsibility for these upshots because there is a strong connection between their occurrence and his agency. Others will be classified as secondary manifestations of his agency; these are outcomes that he could affect, but which do not count as reflections of his agency. I will now argue that *doings* should be classified as primary manifestations of agency, while *allowings* should be classified as merely secondary manifestations of agency.

My analysis of the doing/allowing distinction starts from a suggestion made by Philippa Foot. Foot suggests that whether an agent counts as doing or bringing about some upshot depends on the relationship between the agent and the sequence leading to that upshot.⁸ I suggest that the most fruitful way of understanding Foot's suggestion is in terms of whether the

⁷ I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

⁸ Foot (1984), p. 282

agent's behaviour is *part of* the sequence leading to the upshot or not.⁹ Thus, an agent does or brings about an upshot if and only if his behaviour is part of the sequence leading to that upshot. An agent merely allows an upshot if his behaviour is relevant to, but not part of, the sequence leading to that upshot.

For example, if I kick a ball, which then hits a window and the window breaks, the breaking of the window is something I have done. The pertinent sequence leads from my kick, through the flight of the ball and the contact with the window, to the window's breaking. My behaviour is part of this sequence. On the other hand suppose that someone else kicks the ball through the window, but I could have intercepted the ball. The pertinent sequence leads from the other agent's kick, through the ball's flight to the contact with the window, to the window's breaking. My behaviour is not part of the sequence, even though I could have halted the sequence by intercepting the ball. The breaking of the window is something I have merely allowed.

When formulated in this way, I believe that Foot's suggestion is essentially correct. However, further analysis is needed to explain when an agent's behaviour counts as part of the sequence leading to an upshot.¹⁰ I suggest that whether an agent's behaviour counts as part of the sequence leading to an upshot depends on the nature of the chain of facts through which the agent is relevant to that upshot. In the first example, I am relevant to the window's breaking through the following chain of facts: {I kick the ball; the ball flies towards the window; the ball hits the window}. In the second case, I am relevant through this chain: {I do not intercept the ball; the ball is not intercepted; the ball hits the window}. I suggest that an agent will count as part of a sequence (and thus the upshot of the sequence will count as something he has done) if and only if each fact in the chain of facts through which the agent is relevant to the upshot is *substantial*.¹¹

⁹ For discussion in support of this interpretation, see [author] 2008b.

¹⁰ See my discussion in [author] 2008b.

¹¹ For a more detailed defence of my account of the doing/allowing distinction, see [author] 2008a, Chapters 5 and 6.

A fact is substantial if and only if it represents some change or additional to the world. There are several ways a fact can be substantial. It can be substantial because it is a positive fact (a fact that something did occur rather than a fact that something did not occur), or because it is an active fact (a fact that requires the agent to exercise his agency), or because it is contrary to the assumptions of normality (the assumptions of normality are the set of propositions that we assume to be so unless we are told otherwise).¹² A fact may also be substantial, relative to a given sequence, if it is the fact that a barrier that was legitimately in use to prevent the sequence is absent. Consider a variation of the window-breaking cases above. Another agent placed a net in front of the window and then kicked the ball. I moved the net, so it was no longer in place when the ball reached it and the ball broke the window. Because the net was in use to prevent the ball from breaking the window the absence of the net counts as a substantial fact and as part of the sequence leading to the window's breaking.

For an agent's behaviour to count as part of the sequence leading to an upshot, every fact in the chain of facts through which he is relevant to the upshot must be substantial. A non-substantial fact breaks the connection between the agent and the upshot, so he counts as relevant to the upshot but not part of the sequence. For example, in the second window example, I am only relevant to the window's breaking through my failure to intercept the ball. This non-substantial fact breaks the connection between my behaviour and the upshot, so my behaviour does not count as part of the sequence leading to the window breaking; I merely allow the window to be broken.

I would also count as merely allowing the window to break if I removed something that would have intercepted the ball, so long as this barrier was not *in use* to prevent the window breaking. Suppose some towels had been drying on a washing-line in the path of the ball. Seeing the washing is dry, I bring it in. If the towels had remained where they were, the ball would have hit them and bounced away from the window. In this case, I am

¹²For discussion of the positive/negative distinction and the active/passive distinction, see Bennett (1995).

relevant to the window's breaking through the fact that the towels were not on the line. Again, that the towels were absent is a non-substantial fact. It breaks the connection between my behaviour and the window's smashing. I count as merely allowing the window to be broken.

In the other window-breaking examples, every fact through which the agent is relevant to the window's breaking is substantial. In the first case, I kick the ball, the ball flies towards the window and the ball hits the window, making the window break. Clearly, these are all substantial facts. My conduct counts as part of the sequence leading to the window's breaking; I count as breaking the window. In the third example, I remove the net that had been set up to prevent the ball hitting the window, the net is not in place, the ball hits the window and makes the window break. The fact that the net is absent is substantial relative to the pertinent sequence, because the net is a barrier that was legitimately in use to prevent the sequence.¹³ Again, my conduct counts as part of the sequence leading to the breakage and I count as making the window break.

Substantial facts represent some change or addition to the world. Positive, active facts represent changes to the way the world would be without the agent's agency. Facts that contradict the assumptions of normality represent changes from the way we expect the world to be. Facts about the absence of barriers that are in use to prevent a given sequence represent changes relative to the legitimate plans of another agent or to the stable status quo. In making these facts obtain, the agent leaves an impression of his agency on the world. Thus when we are looking for the primary manifestations of agency, it makes sense to follow the chains of substantial facts leading from the agent's behaviour. When a chain of substantial facts leads from the agent's behaviour to an upshot, the upshot is a change brought about by the agent. It can therefore be seen as an imposition of the agent's

¹³ Much more needs to be said to clarify when a barrier counts as legitimately in use. However, to give a rough approximation, a barrier cannot count as legitimately in use, so that its removal counts as a substantial fact if the barrier requires the continuing use of resources that belong to the removing agent and he has not implicitly or explicitly agreed to the continuing use of the resources as a barrier.

will on the world. Therefore that upshot should count as a primary manifestation of his agency.

It makes sense to regard the things an agent allows as secondary manifestations of agency and the things he does as primary manifestations of his agency. The things he allows do not reflect his ability to have an effect on the world; the things he does do reflect his ability to have an effect on the world.

I believe that my analysis of the doing/allowing distinction both adequately characterises this distinction and has the required connection to the distinction between primary and secondary manifestations of agency. Under this analysis, the things we do are primary manifestations of our agency and the things we merely allow are secondary manifestations of our agency. However, the analysis of the doing/allowing distinction is highly controversial, so I will try to show that my overall argument does not depend upon the acceptance of this particular analysis of the doing/allowing distinction. On the contrary, any plausible analysis of the doing/allowing distinction should imply that doings are primary manifestations of agency while allowings are merely secondary manifestations of agency.

A glance over the literature supports my claim. Foot and her followers have made variations of the claim that an agent does harm if and only if his behaviour is part of, originates or sustains the threatening sequence.¹⁴ Alan Donagan, Shelley Kagan and others have suggested that doing involves exercising one's agency or interfering with the natural course of things.¹⁵ Others have suggested that doing harm involves physical forces running from the agent to the upshot.¹⁶ Under each of these accounts there is good reason to see doings as primary manifestations of agency and allowings as merely secondary manifestations.

It is no coincidence that so many accounts of the doing/allowing distinction have an obvious connection to the distinction between primary and secondary manifestations of agency. One reason we draw a distinction

¹⁴ See Foot (1967), (1984); Kamm (1996).

¹⁵ See Donagan (1977), p. 43; Kagan (1989), p. 83-127; McMahan (1993).

¹⁶ See Howard-Snyder (2007).

between doing and *mere* allowing is to capture an aspect of this more fundamental distinction. We are interested in what an agent has done because we are interested in the consequences of an agent's actions that implicate his agency particularly strongly. We use the term 'allowing' because we need to be able to speak about upshots that an agent is relevant to, but not strongly implicated in. The doing/allowing distinction picks out one asymmetry between ways in which an agent can be implicated in the consequences of his actions. It picks out cases in which there is a particularly strong type of connection between the agent's behaviour and the upshot in question. Other distinctions focus on different asymmetries: for example the distinction between what is strictly intended and what is merely foreseen focuses on the differences in how the agent's will is implicated. Thus the doing/allowing distinction is not identical to the primary/secondary manifestations of agency distinction. Nonetheless, the distinction between doing and allowing has its roots in the distinction between primary and secondary manifestations of agency. Thus, even if the analysis of the distinction that I have proposed is rejected, any plausible alternative must have the same implication: doings are primary manifestations of agency; allowings, merely secondary. If I am right that morality must hold an agent more responsible for primary manifestations of his agency than secondary manifestations, it follows that morality should attribute significance to the distinction between doing and allowing.

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