

CAN A SPASM CAUSE AN ACTION?
AN ARGUMENT FOR RESPONSIBILIST THEORIES
OF ACTION¹

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Summary

According to causalism, actions are events caused in the right way by appropriate mental states. According to responsibilism, attributions of actions are attributions of responsibility. The notion of action is understood as a complement to the notion of non-action, which is in turn delineated by the presence of defeating conditions. I argue that causalism has a problem in answering the title question negatively. The fact that a spasm causes the arm to rise does not compete with a possible *additional* causal process (with the appropriate mental etiology) that leads to (and overdetermines) the very arm rising.

According to the intentionalist theories of action, actions are events that have a special origin. On the causal theory of action, which is paradigmatic for this approach, actions are those events that have been caused in the right way by appropriate mental states. According to the responsibilist theories (of which H. L. A. Hart's 1951 theory is an example), to attribute an action is to attribute responsibility for events or states of the world. Such attributions are characteristically defeasible—the notion of action is thus understood as a complement to the notion of non-action, which is in turn delineated by the presence of defeating conditions (e.g. spasms, ticks, etc.).

In this paper, I present an argument for the responsibilist accounts of action that is reminiscent of the logical connection argument. The datum

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