



Essential Philosophy with Dr. David Schenk

Lesson 22: The Need for a Theory of Action

Outline:

Theory of agency

- When people act freely, they have reasons for their actions instead of acting randomly, but those reasons are not all mechanical or deterministic.
- Not all causal explanations will guarantee one specific result.
- **Example:** One morning, Schenk might choose a bran muffin because he felt like it. The next morning, he might feel the same thing but choose some other breakfast.

Results of the agency theory

- People are not just biological composites, because all the laws of biology are deterministic. People have to be selves.
- Second consequence, causation cannot be deterministic in all cases. Causation will not always be event based, but substances with powers. When Schenk chose the bran muffin, it wasn't his desires or impulses that guarantee the bran muffin but Schenk himself. He was a substance with an innate power to make something new happen. Agency theorists call it agent causation.

Arbitrariness of objection.

- This tries to counter the agency theory.
- The critic is always going to be some kind of determinist who will say, "Your proposal is that some actions are intelligible. You may make causal sense of them. Consider Schenk's breakfast choices. You've got bran muffin, cap'n crunch, or eggs. He's never going to eat things like iron tacks. That is determined." The agency theorist will agree.
- **Determinist:** So you are saying you have common sensical deterministic causal explanations for how David gets into this narrow range of available options. Within that narrow range, why is it that David chooses one option over the other?
- It is a trap. If the agency theorist tries to give a causal explanation for why certain choices were made, then they are backed into a deterministic universe where one particular option is guaranteed. So the agency theorist has to say, "Between those three remaining options, there is no special reason he chooses one over the other.
- **Determinist:** "So if he chooses randomly, chaotically, isn't that simple indeterminism?" The arbitrariness of objection then says the theory of agency isn't really a new theory at all. Agency theorists have to respond this way: *The*



arbitrariness of objection is simply assuming that in order for the causal explanation to be finished, it has to guarantee one certain choice over the next. It's a question begging explanation.