

Abstract

THE DISPOSITIONAL THEORY OF CAUSATION

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DISSERTATION SUMMARY

The dissertation offers a dispositional theory of causation. When a stone is thrown at a vase causing it to shatter, the stone acts as stimulus to the vase's fragility. The analysis developed from this basic identity of cause and stimulus is defended against counterexamples and problem cases from the causation literature. Grounding causation in what is immanent in interacting objects is shown to yield a more satisfactory theory of causation than prevalent deflationary accounts that appeal to possible worlds, pattern-conformation, or statistical regularities. Most recent work on causation focuses exclusively on physics and metaphysics; the dissertation explores the ramifications for ethics following from a dispositional theory of causation. Consider so-called "causation by omission": the vase, teetering on a shelf, falls to the ground and shatters; you could have caught it, but you didn't. Was it your failure to catch the vase that caused it to shatter? The dispositional theory identifies the impact, and not your omission to catch it, as the cause or stimulus. Regardless of whether one's act is the cause of the breakage, one may still be held responsible for failing to act in a given away. Why is this so and what does it tell us about causation?

One Concept of Cause

With David Lewis's counterfactual theory, causation became a central topic of debate. Beyond the basic billiard-ball examples of "biffy causation" that involve mechanical contact, there is disagreement. For instance, can an absence of something, or the failure of something to happen, be a cause? If so, do we then run the risk of including too much as a cause? Ned Hall has suggested a "two concepts" solution: causation is either production or dependence. Absences do not produce anything, but things may depend on them. The dissertation defends a one concept view. All causation is production. In Chapter 1, I argue that to avoid skeptical challenges to the concept of causation, it's essential that we avoid the proliferation of causal concepts and opt instead for a more systematic approach as provided by the dissertation. Chapter 2 provides an analysis of the concept of cause. This single concept can be used to analyze other related notions that capture our everyday talk about causation more generally. For instance, absences may be relevant insofar as they help explain the causal structure or account for an agent's moral responsibility. Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate how this is so.

Cause and Disposition

If we put dispositions first as the basic concept in metaphysics, we can account for other aspects of reality, such as modality, causation, and laws of nature. This is the advantage of dispositional essentialist metaphysics. However, the work of showing that dispositions can indeed serve to account for other notions is thus far largely unaccomplished. Chapter 2 provides a dispositional analysis of causation and thereby substantiates one strand of the dispositional metaphysics view. Dispositions are properties

typified by their characteristic manifestations, which occur under characteristic stimulus conditions. Fragile things are ones that shatter when knocked. On my account of causation, when stimulus and manifestation occur in the presence of the disposition, we have cause and effect. The stone (stimulus) hits the fragile vase (disposition), causing it to shatter (manifestation). It is crucial that, as well as the fragility of the vase, we take into account of the dispositional properties of the stone in order to identify cause and effect. We must appeal to this reciprocity of dispositional partners to completely account for causal relations. The resulting theory offers solutions to counterexamples that have defeated nearly all other competing accounts.

“Double Prevention”

Suzy throws a stone at a vase, which shatters. Nearby, Billy had attempted to block Suzy’s throw, but was unable to do so because you held him back. This is a case of “double prevention.” By preventing Billy’s interference, you are somehow complicit in the matter of the destroyed vase. Had you not prevented Billy from stopping Suzy, the vase would not have been destroyed. For many, this amounts to the claim that you caused the vase to break. Chapter 3 argues to the contrary, you do not cause the vase to shatter. Rather, your action merely helps explain why the vase is destroyed. The distinction between explanatory and causal claims is crucial, and is made clear by the theory that to explain an event is to provide information about that event’s causal history. Sometimes we cite events to convey information about causes, and not to imply that they are causes themselves.

A different problem arises from cases of “disconnection.” A boulder is perched on top of a hill on a downward slope with a brick preventing it from rolling downhill and ruining a rosebush at the bottom. You remove the brick and the boulder rolls down. This is causation. Chapter 3 argues that disconnection is a special kind of ordinary causation: production by cessation. The difference between cessation and double prevention can be told by the dispositional theory of causation. Disconnection is not double prevention, as some have claimed; such cases are therefore not counterexamples to our claim that double prevention is not causation.

Responsibility Without Causation

Your desk plant wilts and dies for lack of water. If you had watered it more regularly, it would have survived. Did you kill the plant? Did your neglect cause it to die? There is no causation by omission on our account. Nonetheless, you bear responsibility for the plant’s death. Chapter 4 argues that responsibility does not imply causation. The responsibility for the plant’s death comes from the fact that one ought to have watered the plant. This normative fact that you ought to have acted in a particular way explains why, speaking loosely, one may be accused of killing the plant. This is not to say that causation itself is a normatively-laden concept or that the question of whether an event is a cause is determined by any normative considerations. But responsibility is often a normative question. The tendency for confusion stems from the use of the causal idiom to express judgments about responsibility.