

Causal pluralism

1. Introduction

Most of the philosophical discussion about the metaphysics of causation has been dominated by the 'straightjacket' view:

- There is a single, unified and all-encompassing metaphysical nature underlying all causal relations. The aim of philosophical inquiry about causation is then to reveal this nature.
- Every theory about causation that tries to tell this story failed so far. They all face certain counterexamples.

Based on this failing Psillos wants to “question the plausibility and fruitfulness of the straightjacket as a whole.” He wants to defend a specific version of causal pluralism.

He compares his version of causal pluralism to the common cold: “a rather loose conception with no single underlying nature.”

2. The functional view

The functional view wants to understand causation in a functional way:

- One should state a number of propositions that our folk theory of causation consists in. Causation, is then simply whatever satisfies this folk theory.
- However not necessary, it is typical for proponents of the functional view to hold that there is a single metaphysical nature of causation that the functional approach identifies indirectly.

It is impossible to give a clear notion of a folk theory of causation. We seem to have two opposing intuitions of what the nature of causation is.

- *The regularity intuition* holds that “whether or not a sequence of two distinct events c and e is causal depends on whether or not events like c are regularly followed by events like e .”
- *The intrinsic-relation intuition* claims that “whether or not a sequence of two distinct events c and e is causal depends wholly on the events c and e and their own properties and relations, that is, it depends wholly on the intrinsic and local features of the actual sequence of events.”

A functional theory cannot account for both intuitions.

3. The two-concept view

The two-concept view of causation holds that there are two concepts of causations.

- *Causation as dependence* corresponds then according to the regularity intuition. Causality is seen as a form of dependence (usually a counterfactual one) between two events,
- *Causality as production* follows the intrinsic-relation intuition. Causality is seen in the way that there is something in the cause producing the effect.

An advantage of the two-concepts view is that it can account for both our intuitions of regularity and intrinsic-relation.

The two-concept view proposes “two straightjackets” since each conception of causality corresponds with a single, simple metaphysical foundation of causality.

The problem with the two-concept view is that there seems to be no clear criterion to decide when we have to deal with this concept of causality rather than that.

4. Varieties of Pluralism

An interesting account of causal pluralism is developed by Christopher Hitchcock. According to him there are two stages in causal analysis:

- “In the first stage, some privileged class of entity is identified which pertains to causal relations, e.g., laws, relations of counterfactual dependence, probabilistic dependence, manipulability, causal processes. The thought here is that when it is the case that *c* causes *e*, some such entity is present.”
- When the first stage is completed the second stage kicks in “This is an analysis of causation in terms of the privileged class of entity identified in stage 1. For instance, causation consists in the ancestral of counterfactual dependence among events.”

The idea is that we should hold a causal pluralism on the second stage:

- There is no such things as *the* causal relation.
- Causal relationships are thus not reducible to one underlying entity.
- The task of causal analysis is here to identify some causal relation that is present in a particular case of causation.

The idea above needs further development since it is consistent with two opposing views:

- *Disjunctivism* holds that the causal relation is disjunctive. “It is nomological dependence, or counterfactual dependence, or probabilistic dependence, or the presence of a causal process, or invariance-under-intervention, or . . .” Psillos sees two problems:
 - It is unclear how causality is identified here. He claims that there “must be some independent grasp of CAUSATION, which is then identified with a certain disjunction. But it is not clear what this independent grasp consists in.”
 - It is equally unclear to see which disjunct is realised in particular cases.
- *The many-concept view* holds that “there are many concepts of CAUSATION each corresponding to a way of identifying the causal relation; none of them should be privileged in being the concept of CAUSATION.” As with the two-concepts view this view allows us to have a number of straightjackets so that in each case there is a metaphysical fact corresponding to the causal relation.

- This view is also not unproblematic since it shares the same problems as the two-concept view and moreover, is not clear why all the different given concepts are concepts of causation.

Hitchcock goes further than these interpretations in denying “that there is anything deeper that unites the many and varied causal relations.”

- If you want to argue that all these different concepts signify causal relations there must be something in virtue of which they are all *causal* relations.
- Since this cannot be anything deeper that unites different causal relations it is not clear what it is.

5. The symptoms of causation

There are many ways to identify the presence of a causal relation. “This is because, generally, when *c* causes *e*, it will be the case that:

- there is a law (deterministic or statistical) that links *c* and *e*
- if *c* hadn’t happened, *e* wouldn’t have happened
- $\text{prob}(e/c) > \text{prob}(e)$ in (all) relevant background contexts
- some causal process (mechanism) connects *c* and *e*
- there is a law (deterministic or statistical) that links *c* and *e*
- something gets transferred from *c* to *e*.

These entities are in most cases correlated. This explains why we can have agreement about what causes what even if there is disagreement about the nature of causation.

Psillos proposes that we call the above entities “symptoms” of causation and look at them in the same way as we look at symptoms of diseases.

- None of them is privileged in uncovering the nature of causation or in identifying the presence of a causal relation.
- Nor is it necessary that all of them are present to identify a causal relation.

He makes the analogy with two different diseases – measles and the common cold – and bases two distinct interpretations on this distinction.

- In the first, *Agnostic causal pluralism* he identifies with the measles analogy. Although there are many different symptoms to detect measles and not always all symptoms are present measles is still a disease with a single underlying nature. The analogy suggests thus that there is a single metaphysical nature of causation but it can have many symptoms and can accordingly be traced by different combinations of symptoms. This analogy suggests that there may be a single underlying nature of causation although we do not know it.
- The second, more radical, view is called *atheistic causal pluralism*. It follows the common cold analogy. Psillos argues that with the common cold there is no single underlying nature of the disease but it is rather a “loose condition with no single underlying nature.”

In the rest of the paper Psillos will pursue the stronger notion of Atheistic causal pluralism and leave the idea of agnostic causal pluralism aside as a fall-back option.

Next, he gives some arguments in favour of his position:

- There is a correlation between the symptoms of causation that allows us to group them together in saying that they track the same condition.
- All the straightjacket accounts of causation, who try to distinguish one symptom of causation as fundamental fail.
- Atheistic causal pluralism can also deal with the many counterexamples that the straightjacket views encounter since no symptom is fundamental and not all symptoms need to be present for a causal diagnosis.
- It has the advantage over the two- or many-concept view that it can still hold that causation is a single concept so that it doesn't have to explain what the underlying bond between different concepts could be.

6. Wittgensteinian Pluralism

In this chapter Psillos wants to attack the view that there is a need for a deep metaphysical notion of causality. He claims that this need is a result of our language in which we have explicit causal talk. The argument is that explicit causal talk can be best explained by “the admission of a condition of the world – causation – that answers to this talk.

Psillos claims that this argument can be defeated. The reasoning is that explicit causal talk is dispensable but nonetheless useful.

- Explicit causal language does not add new content to language. In fact, everything we mean by cause is already captured by more primitive causal concepts such as scrape, push, wet, carry,... The point here is that “there is no need to invoke explicit causal expressions to capture and come to know causal truths.”
- A language which does not contain any explicit causal expressions can capture the same causal truths as a language who does have explicit causal expressions. “Explicitly causal statements will always be made true by some concrete (implicitly) causal statement.”
- “Explicit causal talk is useful not because it enables us to talk about facts that we cannot, in principle, capture in another way. Its usefulness consists in the contingent fact that our languages are not rich enough to capture all causal truths by means of more specific verbs or expressions. Besides, explicit causal talk is useful for forming generalisations, and for talking in an indefinite manner about the results of an action or an event-type.”
- Since explicit causal talk is here presented as a generalisation of more simple, unproblematic causal notions such as breaking, pushing, creating, capsizing, dissolving, decompressing,... there is no need or a theory of causation to refer to a deep, unifying metaphysical nature.
- Wittgensteinian pluralism explains how the activities above can all be called causal even though they do not need to share some hidden essence. Moreover they all give rise to the different symptoms of causation. For an atheistic causal pluralist then, this is enough to group them together as instances of causation.