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Causation

In this paper I will explore the issue of causation by discussing the thoughts of three philosophers. First, I will explain David Hume’s conclusion about causation, which is known as regularity theory. Then, I will introduce a criticism of this theory raised by A. C. Ewing. Next, I will detail Ewing’s response to this criticism via the entailment theory of causation. Finally, I will explore G. E. M. Anscombe’s view of causation, which challenges both the views of Hume and Ewing.

David Hume offered a brand-new way for metaphysicians to approach the issue of causation with his regularity theory of causation. He begins to formulate his theory by establishing a few core principles from which he will be operating. First, there is the issue of what exactly causation is. In order for us to be talking about causation between things, they have to possess contiguity and that “the object we call cause *precedes* the other which we call effect” (Hume 261). This contiguity is the idea that the object that is referred to as the cause and the one that is the effect are both reasonably close to each other in terms of place (location) and in time. “Precedes” here means that the cause object comes before the effect object in time. These two factors combine into one of the crucial parts of causation, necessity. As the mind observes repetitions of one object preceding another and resulting in the occurrence of that other object contiguously, it begins to consider that second object to be the “usual attendant” of the first (261). This impression that the mind has that the first object will result in the second object is what Hume calls the idea of necessity in causation.

After Hume establishes what necessity is in relation to causation, he establishes two principles about the process of reason that he considers obvious in philosophy that will play a role in the formulation of his theory. The first is that “reason alone can never give rise to any original idea” and the second is that “reason…can never make us conclude, that a cause or productive quality is absolutely requisite to every beginning of existence” (262). Hume uses both of these principles to establish the fact that the idea of necessity in causation is something we derive from experience. Hume says that if we wish to establish the idea that a cause has the power to result in an effect, we must show that this power is perceivable by the mind.

With these principles in mind, Hume’s theory of causation begins to take shape. The necessity of connection between cause and effect has been established, as has the idea that the cause has the power to result in an effect. But, as Hume points out, we are unable to locate where this necessity and idea of efficacy are actually found in the objects that are being identified as cause and effect or in the connection between them! So where are we getting this idea of the efficacy of a cause to produce an effect? Hume claims that if we were to continue to view causation in a way that requires us to have an idea of power in the causation, we will never arrive at any sort of conclusion that has real meaning. Though Hume does not believe that causation exists in the world he does make it clear that things can be in “constant conjunction” with one another. However, there are two things are impossible to claim based on this conjunction. First, we cannot claim that in the repetition observed between an object of cause and effect do we discover anything new in those objects (266). Reason alone cannot draw any new idea out of the observation of the repetition of these objects. Second, this repetition does not “produce” anything new in either the objects involved in this repeated relationship, nor in anything outside of the relationship (267). Hume says that each instance of this repeated conjunction is completely independent. If we saw two billiard balls collide today, the impact is completely independent from a collision between those same two balls that occurred a year ago. They are completely separated by time and place and nothing about the first instance played a role in the second (267).

So, the idea of necessary connection that we find between two conjoined objects cannot be found anywhere *in* the objects or in their interaction. But that idea of necessity is still present, so where does it occur? Hume answers this question with the following statement: “Tis [in the soul] that the real power of causes is plac’d, along with their connexion and necessity” (268). With this statement, Hume removes the power of causes, their connection to each other, and any necessity of these connections from the world. Instead, Hume argues that all of these things that we associate with causation are found in us. Nothing we observe about the thing that unites causes and effects can be found in the world, instead, it “lies in the determination of the mind to pass from the one to the other” (268). The idea of causation does not come from the impression we get from observing cause and effect, there is nothing in the objects to make an impression on us. Instead, it produces in our minds the notion that the transition from one event (or object) to another is customary, while not actually producing or being produced from anything in the physical world. It is in the determination of our mind to move from the cause to the effect that the power of causation is found.

This theory of Hume’s is now known as “regularity theory” because of what it leaves behind in the world. The power of causes is, for Hume, found in the “soul” but that does not mean everything involved in the cause is removed from the world. Instead what is left is the regularity of the event that we perceive. The same pairing of events happening over and over is what gives us the confidence to say that there is a connection between them. This repeated pattern observed in events is the regularity that is left in reality. This connection is not found in the actual events however, but instead in the “soul” which considers the union of the two events at all the instances we have observed them in the past as well as now.

Of course, Hume’s regularity theory raised objections. One objection, based on psychology, is raised by A. C. Ewing. Ewing asserts that when one believes something for a reason, one’s mental state is determined by the awareness you have of that reason, not because one’s mental state in a similar class to the state that accompanies the awareness of similar reasons (275). The belief that one has in this case has something to do with an actual characteristic of the reason, not merely on the awareness that a reason is present; what the reason is matters. Ewing also cites memory as another psychological process that seems poorly explained by Hume’s theory. For one to have a memory, the conscious state of remembering “must be genuinely determined by, not merely follow on, the past events remembered” (275).

After raising this objection, Ewing offers up a different theory of causation, one that he believes can deal with this issue. This theory is referred to as “entailment theory.” This theory is based on the idea that the concept of necessity can be included in the world (Hume thought otherwise) on a logical ground. This comes from the idea of valid inference in logic. When a conclusion follows logically from a premise, that means that there is something about the premise that is connected in such a way to something in the conclusion that the conclusion could not occur without the premise (276). Ewing says that “the regularity theory is not mistaken in what it asserts but only in what it denies” (276). It denies the reality of necessity as something both existing in the world and between the objects of cause and effect; entailment theory includes necessity as part of objective reality.

Ewing uses entailment theory to address his objection to Hume when he asserts that “the occurrence of regularities is in any case a fact of experience” (277). The facts of the experience matter, just like the character of the reason for your mental state matters, or how the state of consciousness associated with remembering is determined by the event being remembered. If causation is just regularity, then saying that memory A causes one to remember in a certain way (mental state B) does not give any information about the “regular sequence” of mental state B on memory A, it just says that this mental state follows (277). Now if the memory is the reason for the mental state, we get an explanation as to why this regularity occurs. If there was no explanation, we would be forced to just chalk it up to coincidence. Entailment theory allows for the memory to in fact be a reason for the mental state because now the nature of the cause involves the effect. The mental state logically follows from (or entails) the memory from which it follows. Ewing’s entailment theory allows for causes to be logically called reasons for effects, something that to Ewing believes is vital in psychology and a shortcoming of Hume’s regularity theory.

There is yet another theory in the debate about causation, this one coming from G. E. M. Anscombe. Her theory opposes both Hume’s regulatory theory and Ewing’s entailment theory. The reason Anscombe’s conception of causation opposes both the others is because Anscombe rejects the basic assumption made by both other philosophers that necessity is an essential part of the relationship between causes and effects (Anscombe 286). Anscombe says that it is actually quite simple to prove that necessity is not associated with causation. To explain why this is the case she first brings to our attention some situations in which necessity does not seem to play a role in causation.

The first of these points is that it is much easier to “trace effects back to causes with certainty than to predict effects from causes…” (287). We can say with confidence where an effect came from, but it is much more difficult to say that a cause necessarily will result in an effect until we actually perceive the effect. Anscombe uses an example to illustrate her second point against the assumption of necessity. She supposes that one came in contact once with someone who had a contagious disease and then asks a doctor if they will get the disease. The only thing the doctor could normally say for sure is that one may or may not get it, nothing more. A doctor very rarely knows all the factors that may cause you to get the disease, they only have partial knowledge. Anscombe believes this idea “betrays the assumption that there is such a thing that is to know” that is the whole set of conditions that would result in your getting the disease. She concludes the point by saying that if it is not necessary to know all the causes that would result in you getting the disease before saying that your contact with an infected individual was the cause, is there any necessity in this at all if you don’t have to know every aspect of it? Her final point deals with the derivativeness of an effect from a cause. For this she uses the example of parenthood as a causal relation. The cause is two parents having sex and the effect is having a child which can be derived from the material fission of cells. Analyzing this case in terms of necessity uses the laws of nature to derive knowledge of the effect (the child) from the cause (the parents) and the other way around, but it simply doesn’t “show us the cause as source of the effect” it just gives us information about the cause and effect we have observed (288).

It may appear that Anscombe completely denies the concept of necessity in causation, but that is not the case. To her, necessity plays a part in causation if we just allow for both necessitating and non-necessitating causes. By her definition, necessity in causation means that a cause is necessitating of an effect if it is certain that if the cause occurs, the effect will follow, unless something prevents it (296). To Anscombe, it is this idea of something preventing an effect from occurring that goes unnoticed by other philosophers. This broadened conception of necessity opens up the possibility for a non-necessitating cause. A cause of this type would be a case when a cause fails to produce its effect, and there is nothing that could have played a role in preventing that effect. To illustrate what a cause like this would look like she uses an example of a bomb connected to a Geiger counter. If the Geiger counter registers a certain reading, the bomb will go off. However, if it will or will not is not determined because it is placed near something radioactive in such a way that it is not possible to determine if the counter will register the appropriate reading for detonation of the bomb or not. This is because you simply cannot predict whether or not the counter will cause the bomb to go off because of the unpredictability about the nature of radioactive decay. Anscombe recognizes that if the bomb did go off, the Geiger counter reading would of course be the cause, but it is simply not necessary that the counter produces that cause. Both Hume and Ewing assume that necessity must always be there. For one (Hume) it is in our soul and for the other (Ewing) it is in the world and the cause and effect themselves. Anscombe, however, believes that there are multiple types of causation (necessary and non-necessary), and Hume and Ewing fail to account for this in their theories. The availability of this notion of non-necessary causation is the result of the invention of indeterministic physics, says Anscombe, and the determinism that is inherent in theories like Hume’s and Ewing’s (which is as Anscombe argues are a result of the invention of deterministic Newtonian physics) is incorrect. Anscombe asks us to reconsider the thought that just because we see regularities in nature, the effects that result from the causes are always necessary.

Works Cited

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