David Lewis

Void and Object

Menzies' Theory of Causation

- Causal relation is an intrinsic relation between two events -- it is logically determined by the *natural* properties and relations of the events.
- Other non-natural, such as moral or epistemic, considerations, should not determine whether a causal relation holds between two events or not (in other words, whether we should assign moral responsibility or whether we could ever detect the causal relation, should be irrelevant).

[The Canberra plan]:

- **First step:** We start with a platitudinous folk theory of the causal relation, which includes

  (i) the causal relation is between wholly distinct events;

  (ii) it is an intrinsic relation;

  (iii) it is typically associated with a probabilistic version of counterfactual dependence.

Examples

(1) the short circuit of the wire → the house fire

(2) His driving while intoxicated → the car accident

(3) The heat from the sun ⟶ the wax's melting

(i) the causal relation is between wholly distinct events;

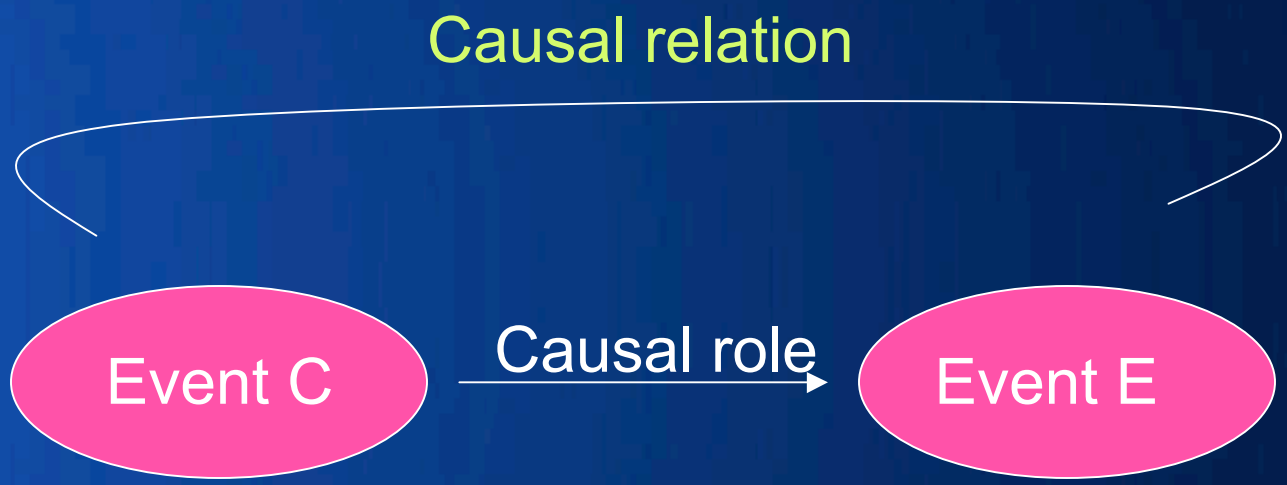
(ii) it is an intrinsic relation;

(iii) it is typically associated with a probabilistic version of counterfactual dependence.

[The Canberra plan]:

- **Second Step:** This folk theory specifies a functional role that the causal relation is said to occupy.
- **Third Step:** We then stipulate that the causal relation is the relation that does in fact occupy the specified role.

Causal Relations



§ Lewis' Critique of Menzies' Causal Functionalism

1. Causal functionalism analyzes causation in terms of causal relations that play a specific causal role.
2. A relation required relata.
3. But the void and absences afford no causal relata: There is nothing there at all, so there is nothing for events to happen to.
4. Therefore, causal functionalism cannot accommodate causation by the void or causation by absences.

Q: How do we solve the problem of missing relata?

* **Lewis: The only analysis that escapes the problem of missing relata is the counterfactual analysis.**

[Lewis' argument against Causa Functionalism]

1. If we analyze causation by starting with the functional analysis of causal relation in the actual world (let us call it *biff*), and going on to define other varieties of causation one by one in terms of biff, we will end up facing a variety of causation.

Varieties of Causation:

(1) Causation by an intrinsic causal relation between two distinct events (let's call it *Biff*). – Menzies' theory would apply here.

(2) Causation by absences, omission (negligence), and void.

(3) Causation by prevention (the effect is an absence or a non-event).

(4) Indirect *transitive* causation (causal chain).

(5) Indirect causation by double prevention.

[Lewis' argument against Causal Functionalism]

2. When faced with varieties of causation, we are given either the choice of admitting that 'causation' is many-concepts-in-one (it's ambiguous), or the choice that causation is a disjunctive concept that covers many different relations.

[Lewis' argument against Causa Functionalism]

3. However, the many-concepts hypothesis and the disjunctive-concept hypothesis are both unsatisfactory.
4. Therefore, we should not analyze causation in terms of the functional analysis of *biff*.

Lewis' Conclusion

- Menzies went wrong when he took the functional definition of biff to be the *whole* of a conceptual analysis of causation.

- We should look elsewhere for a conceptual analysis of 'causation'.

What is causation (1)?

- As a matter of analytic necessity, across all possible worlds, what is the unified necessary and sufficient condition for causation?
- ___ Lewis: It is a matter of counterfactual dependence of events (or absences) on other events (or absences).

What is causation (2)?

- What is causation – As a matter of contingent fact, what is the feature of this world, and of other possible worlds sufficiently like it, which determines the truth values of ascriptions of causal relations?
- ___ Lewis: It is biff: the pattern of relatedness of events to one another.

Lewis' Conclusion

- **There are two different concepts of causation – different theories answer different questions. The counterfactual theory and the causal functionalism (biff) theory are not in competition.**

JeeLoo Liu:

***Q*: Is Lewis here making the concession speech that his counterfactual theory does not give us the notion of causation as what is basic in the actual world?**

§ Biff and Counterfactuals

- If biff is offered as a supervenience basis for causation as it takes place in our world, then the possibility that other variety of causation takes place in biffless worlds remote from actuality is no cause for alarm.

Biff and Supervenience

- For any two distinct event kinds *C* and *E*

___ if there is a causal relation between Cs and Es in the actual world, call the relation *biff*;

___ then for any [restricted] possible world, if there are event kinds *C* and *E*, there exist a biff-like relation between them.

Summary of Lewis' Main Theses

1. **Menzies' theory of causation treats causal relation as an intrinsic relation between two events.**
2. **Menzies' theory also analyzes 'causation' as a functional role, which the said causal relation is supposed to play.**
3. **This theory describes a certain kind of causation *in the actual world* – let us call it *biff*, but it does not cover the whole of causal stories.**

Summary of Lewis' Main Theses

4. In particular, it does not give adequate analysis to "causation by absences" such as the example of the void causing your death.
5. Lewis' counterfactual analysis, on the other hand, can explain causation by absences adequately .
6. The solution is to combine the two causal notions: *biff* and counterfactual dependence. We use *biff* as the basis for supervenience, and the supervenience can run in other possible worlds.

INTERMISSION

TAKE FIVE

Helen Beebee

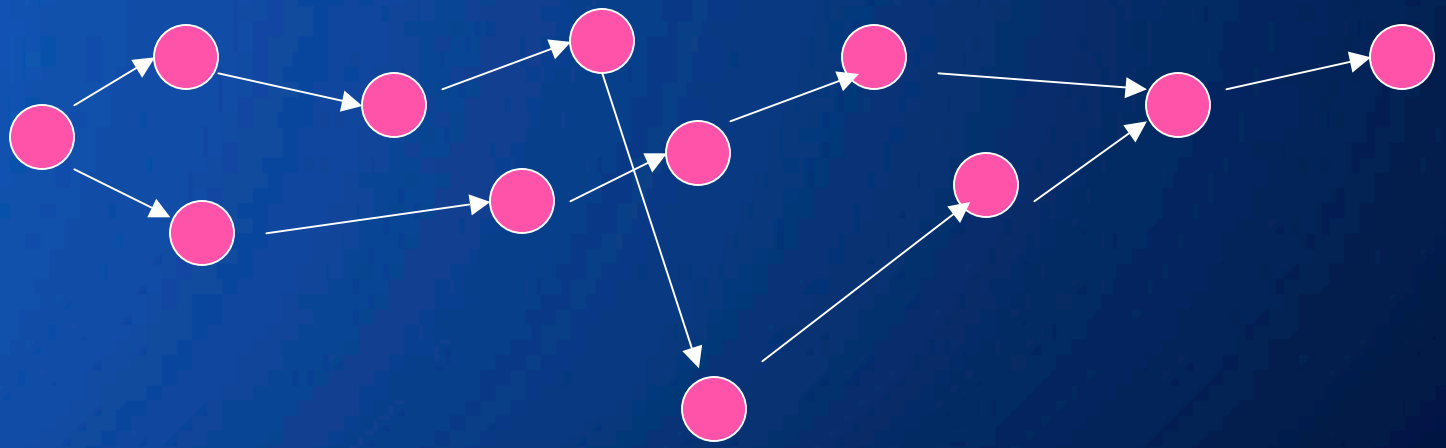
Causing and Nothingness

§ Causation by absences:

- Examples:
- 1. Jones's failure to close the fire doors was a cause of the raging fire that destroyed the building.
- 2. Smith's failure to water her office plants was a cause of their death.
- 3. The lack of rain was a cause of the bush fire.

§ Beebee's Main Theses on Causation

1. Causation is a relation between events.
2. The network model of causation: The complete causal history of the universe can be represented by a sort of vast and complex "neuron diagram", where the nodes represent events and the arrows between them represent causal relations.



§ Beebee's Main Theses on Causation

4. In this network model, the causal history of any event is a relational structure.
5. On this picture, absence cannot be part of a relation, since there is nothing to relate to.
6. Thus, there is no causation by absence.

Relationist vs. Nonrelationist

Relationist view on causation	Nonrelationist view on causation
___ Beebee's view Causation is a causal relation between events.	___ Mellor ___ Lewis (in "Void and Object") Causation is not a relation.
1. There is no causation by absences. 2. Absences only feature in causal explanations, not causation *per se*.	1. There is causation by absences. 2. Causation by absences can be analyzed via counterfactual dependence.

§ Beebee's Proposed Analysis of 'Causation by Absences': Causal Explanation

- If absences are to figure in causal explanations without doing any causing, there must be a distinction between causation and causal explanations:
- ___ Something can be the explanans of a causal explanation without itself being a cause of the event cited in the explanandum.

Examples

- **Oswald's shot caused JFK's death.**

  → causation

- **JFK died because Oswald shot him.**
- **JFK died because somebody shot him.**

  → causal explanation

Beebee's Analysis of 'Causation by Absences':

- Absences can figure in causal explanations, but they are "causally inert" – they don't play any role in causation.
- The correct language is to say that the orchids died *because* Flora failed to water them, not that Flora's failure to water the orchids *cause* their death.

Causal Explanations involving absences:

- There is no reason to deny that explanations invoking facts about absences are genuine causal explanations. With Lewis' example of the void killing Flora, we don't say that the void *causes* her death. Instead, we describe how Flora's causal history *would* have gone had she *not* been cast into the void. – We do not say that *actually* caused her death; rather, we point out that the sorts of events that would have caused her to remain alive *did not* occur.

Causal Network of the World

- **The causal history of the world is a mass of causal processes: Events linked by a vast and complex web of causal explanations. In order that the causal history of the world should look the way it does look, there must have been no *extra* events impinging on it – for those extra events would have had effects that would have changed the causal history of the world in various ways. [But the *lack* of such extra events should not count as causes in the causal chain.]**