

**Phil 317: [handout #21]**  
**Fred Dretske: *Mental Events as Structuring Causes of Behavior***

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**§ Basic Assumptions:**

1. Causal explanations depend on our interests, our purposes, and our prior knowledge. ⇒ No uniquely real causal explanation.
2. There can be different ways of causally explaining the behavior of systems. Causal explanations are not mutually exclusive. ⇒ No explanatory exclusion problem.

**§ Main Thesis:**

- \_\_\_ Psychological explanations ⇒ structuring causes
- \_\_\_ Biological explanations ⇒ triggering causes

**§ Two Kinds of Causes: the Structuring Cause and the Triggering Cause**

**'The structuring cause':**

- \_\_\_ the event or events that *shaped* or *structured* the process of C's causing M.
- \_\_\_ or, the cause of C's causing M.

E.g. the wiring of a car, the hardware conditions of a computer

**'The triggering cause':**

- \_\_\_ the external event or condition that *triggers* the process. [If a stimulus S produces C, and if C, in turn causes M, then S, by triggering the sequence of events composing the process, causes the process to occur.]
- \_\_\_ or, the cause of the C which causes M.

E.g. turning the key in the ignition, pressing a key on the keyboard

- The triggering cause causes the process to occur *now*. The structuring cause is responsible for its being *this process*, one having M as its product, that occurs now.
- One can know what caused C (some triggering stimulus S), know what caused M (namely C), and still wonder about the cause of C's causing M. In this case, already knowing the triggering cause, one is clearly looking for the structuring cause of the process -- what brought about those conditions *in which* C causes M (rather than something else).

C -----> M

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S

- The triggering cause of T gives rise to causal regularities of the following sort: Whenever T occurs in these conditions E occurs. There are no regularities between a structuring cause and its effect of the form: 'when S occurs in these conditions, E also occurs.'
- The structuring causal relationship is a one-many relation while the triggering causal relationship is one-one. The former is like a type, while the latter is always a token.

### § Explanations of the Two Causes: Psychological vs. Biological Explanations

1. This distinction between triggering cause and structuring causes is an important distinction when one is thinking about the explanation of behavior. It is particularly important when one is thinking about the role of reasons in this explanatory enterprise.
2. We are sometimes interested in triggering causes, the external events or conditions that set the process in motion.
3. We are more often interested in the structuring cause: what it is that accounts for the direction that process takes once it is set in motion; what it is that accounts for the production of M rather than something else.
4. When we seek an explanation of behavior in terms of the agent's reasons, we are always looking for a structuring cause.

[Note]:

\_\_\_ Extrinsic properties are relational properties: how the object is related to other things.

\_\_\_ Beliefs, desires, intentions may be in the head, the content of belief, desire and intention is surely not there.

\_\_\_ The content is relational and extrinsic.

The mind/the mental:                    **EXTRINSIC**  
 \_\_\_\_\_ *DOES NOT SUPERVENE ON*

The brain/the physical:                **INTRINSIC**

## § Extrinsic States as Structuring Causes

### To Show:

\_\_\_ Q's behavior can be causally explained by the fact that Q is in a mental state (like a belief) having a certain intentional content.

- In different environments (e.g. a Twin Earth), even if the triggering cause may be the same, the structuring cause is not.
- When the structuring cause is different, the causal explanation of Q's behavior -- though it is identical to the behavior of Q in the normal habitat -- is quite different.

### Conclusion:

\_\_\_ Meanings don't have to be in the head to do their job -- even when the job they are doing is the same.

### [Suggested paper topic]:

1. Does Dretske succeed in giving the mental its causal role? Does the mental play the role of structuring causes? Can the mental also play the role of the triggering cause?
2. If the mental is viewed as a structuring cause of our behavior, is it like our genetic make-up, which also should be viewed as a structuring cause? Will we be satisfied with this kind of analysis?
3. Is Dretske right in claiming that the extrinsic properties of the mental force different causal explanations of the same behavior in different environments? Are you an externalist with regard to causal explanation of behavior?