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Lewis’ Modal Realism and Absence Causation

Introduction

A major criticism of David Lewis’ counterfactual theory of causation is that it allows too many things to count as causes, especially since Lewis allows, in addition to events, absences to be causes as well. Peter Menzies (2004) has advanced this concern under the title “the problem of profligate causation.” In this paper, I will argue that the problem of profligate causation provides resources for exposing a tension between Lewis’ acceptance of absence causation and his modal realism. The result is a different problem of profligate causation—one that attacks the internal consistency of Lewisian metaphysics rather than employing commonsense judgments or intuitions that conflict with Lewis’ extensive list of causes.

Lewis’ counterfactual theory of causation and his inclusion of absence causation

The core idea behind Lewis’ (1973a) counterfactual theory of causation is the following account of causal dependence:

Causal Dependence: Where c and e are distinct actual events, e causally depends on c iff the counterfactual “If c were not to occur, e would not occur” is true.

Causation is then defined in terms of the ancestral of causal dependence:

Causation: Where c and e are distinct actual events, c causes e iff there is a chain of causal dependences between c and e .

Furthermore, Lewis takes absences to be both causes and effects. Yet he denies that absences are events. Hence, Lewis extends his counterfactual theory of causation to include, in addition to events, absences as causes and effects. The gardener's failure to water the plant, for example, causes the plant to die. And, on Lewis' view, the causal efficacy of the gardener's omission is grounded in true counterfactuals such as "had the gardener watered the plant, the plant would not have died."

The problem of profligate causation

Menzies (2004) claims that Lewis' counterfactual theory of causation has the problem of allowing too many things to count as causes. Menzies begins with the following, familiar example:

A person develops lung cancer as a result of years of smoking. It is true that if he had not smoked he would not have developed cancer. It is also true that he would not have developed lung cancer if he had not possessed lungs, or even if he had not been born. But it is absurd to think his possession of lungs or even his birth caused his lung cancer.

(Menzies 2004: 143)

Menzies notes that commonsense tends to take the possession of lungs or birth to be background conditions for, and not causes of, lung cancer. But this distinction between mere background conditions and genuine causes is not one that Lewis can adequately accommodate, for, according to his counterfactual theory, any event but for which the effect would not have occurred is a cause of the effect.

Menzies then proceeds to indicate how the problem is exacerbated by Lewis countenancing absences, omissions, and failures as legitimate causes:

A healthy plant requires regular watering during sweltering hot weather. A gardener whose job it is to water the plant fails to do so and the plant dies. But for the gardener's omission, the plant would not have died. On the other hand, if anyone else had watered the plant, it would not have died. But it seems too absurd to say that the omission of everyone else to water the plant was a cause of its death. (Menzies 2004: 145)

Again, claims Menzies, the problem is that Lewis is unable to distinguish causes from background conditions. While commonsense might accept that the gardener's omission causes the plant to die, commonsense would not accept that everyone else's omissions to water the plant also cause the plant to die. The latter omissions are more intuitively taken to be background conditions for, rather than causes of, the plant's death.

Causes and causally responsible objects

As previously indicated, Lewis includes both *events* and *absences* as the sort of things that can be causes. The goal of the present section is to determine how best to understand the causal role of *objects* on Lewis' account.

In listing cases that would intuitively motivate the acceptance of absence causation, Phil Dowe (2004) includes the following:

- I caused the terrorist attack in London by failing to report information that I had about it.
- The hospital administration caused the death of an elderly patient by refusing to release funds to ship expensive equipment from the USA and thereby allowing her to die by "natural causes." (Dowe 2004: 191)¹

¹ Dowe labels the cases (C) and (D), respectively, but bullets are used here for ease of exposition.

Notice here that objects (the person picked out by “I” and the hospital administration) are causes by their omissions or failures to do certain things. And it is natural in discussions of absence causation to move from talking about a person’s omission (an absence) being a cause to the person (an object) being a cause.

Moreover, there are good reasons for making such a move from causally efficacious absences and events to causally responsible objects. When the gardener’s failure to water the lawn causes the lawn to wilt, it is, after all, the *gardener’s* failure that causes the lawn to wilt. Also, if you take the moral responsibility of a person with respect to a good or bad result to require that the person have some sort of causal responsibility for the result, then there is again reason to move from talk of causally efficacious events and absences to causally responsible persons.

Furthermore, Lewis himself appears to condition the moral responsibility of a person for a good or bad result on the person being causally responsible for the result. Lewis (1986) defends his modal realism against charges of leading to moral indifference. In doing so, he tackles Robert M. Adams’ (1974) question “What is wrong with actualising evils, since they will occur in some other possible world anyway if they don’t occur in this one?” And Lewis responds thusly:

If you actualise evils, you will be an evil-doer, a *causal source* of evil. That is something which, if you are virtuous, you do not want to be. Other-worldly evils are neither here nor there. They aren’t *your* evils. (Lewis 1986: 127, my italics).

Notice that Lewis does not answer Adams’ question by saying “Well, technically, an object never causes anything and, so, no one ever brings about any evils.” Indeed, that would appear to exacerbate, rather than alleviate, the concern of moral indifference. Instead, Lewis gives another answer and, more importantly, one that speaks of “you” (an object) as “a causal source.” Also,

causal detachment from the evils in other possible worlds is apparently what makes it the case that “they aren’t your evils,” implying that moral responsibility for an evil requires some sort of causal responsibility for the evil. Hence, although objects, on Lewis’ view, are not (strictly speaking) causes, they can nonetheless be (in some significant sense) causally responsible. That is, a person positively behaving a certain way (an event) and a person failing to behave a certain way (an absence) can be *causes*, and the person, by way of such causation, can be *causally responsible* even if not, strictly speaking, a *cause*.

Lewis’ possible-world semantics for counterfactuals and his modal realism

In order to further set the stage for this paper’s challenge to Lewisian metaphysics, consider just a few more elements of Lewis’ system.

Lewis (1973b) evaluates counterfactuals using possible worlds and a relation of closeness or resemblance. According to this account, a counterfactual of the form “If it were the case that p , then it would be the case that q ” is true in a world w iff either (1) there are no possible p -worlds (in which case the counterfactual is trivially true), or (2) some p -world where q holds is closer to w than is any p -world where q does not hold.

Lewis, though, is a realist about possible worlds (1986). According to Lewis’ modal realism, possible worlds are the same kind of thing as our actual world. They are just as real and concrete as the world we currently inhabit, differing from our actual world in content but not in kind. When we speak, then, of our world as “the actual world,” “actual” does not pick out any ontologically privileged kind of world. Instead, “actual” is indexical, so that the phrase “the actual world” merely picks out whichever possible world in which the phrase is used.

Furthermore, on Lewis's modal realism, possible worlds are both spatiotemporally and causally isolated. However, the causal isolation of Lewis' possible worlds is, I will presently argue, incompatible with his theory of absence causation.

Lewis' special problem of profligate causation

One summer, I actually did forget to water my lawn during a hot spell. My failure to water the lawn was, naturally enough, followed by patches of grass wilting. According to Lewis' theory of absence causation, I am causally responsible for the lawn wilting, for if I had watered the lawn, then it would not have wilted. And, as the problem of profligate causation indicates, Lewis' theory further entails that everyone else is likewise responsible for the lawn wilting. Notice, however, that this causal responsibility by way of Lewisian absence causation is not limited to persons in the actual world but extends to include persons in other possible worlds. Take, for example, Santa Clause. He does not exist in the actual world (our particular possible world) but, presumably, he is a possible being nonetheless. So, according to Lewis' modal realism, in addition to our possible world, W_A , there is another possible world, W_S , where Santa Clause exists. Now, if Santa Clause had watered my lawn, then it would not have been the case that the lawn wilted. So, Santa Clause, by way of Lewisian absence causation, joins the list of people causally responsible for my lawn wilting. But the wilting of my lawn occurs in W_A , while Santa, who is causally responsible for the wilting of my lawn, exists in W_S . Thus, on Lewis' account of absence causation, Santa violates the causal isolation of Lewis' possible worlds by not watering my lawn.

Should one be uncomfortable with the modal status I have assigned to Santa Claus (either because you think he is in the actual world or think he is in no possible world at all), no matter, for the problem is generated just as effectively using our counterparts. On Lewis' modal realism,

persons are world bound, i.e. each person exists in only one possible world. However, according to Lewis, one still has possible-world counterparts, i.e. persons in other possible worlds that sufficiently resemble one. And these counterparts account for how one has certain properties contingently. Obama, for example, is contingently the president of the U.S. because he is president of the U.S. in the actual world and he has a counterpart in another possible world that is not president. Now, pick any one of your counterparts existing in another possible world. Name that counterpart “CP.” If CP had watered my lawn, then it would not have wilted. Thus, on Lewis’ account of absence causation, CP gets added to the list of persons causally responsible for my lawn wilting. But CP exists in a possible world distinct from the possible world where the wilting of my lawn occurs, and, therefore, we have a person once again, by way of absence of causation, violating the causal isolation of Lewis’ possible worlds.

Let us call this inconsistency between Lewis’ theory of absence causation and his modal realism “Lewis’ special problem of profligate causation.” The remainder of this paper will be devoted to addressing potential replies to Lewis’ special problem of profligate causation.

Lewis’ reply to the problem of profligate causation

When it comes to Lewis’ conceptual analysis of causation, we have been working with his original (1973a) theory. This theory identifies causation with the ancestral of counterfactual dependence of *whether* one event occurs on *whether* another event occurs. Yet there is also Lewis’ (2000) influence theory of causation. This theory analyzes the concept of causation in terms of counterfactuals as well. However, causation is the ancestral of *whether*, *when*, and *how* on *whether*, *when*, and *how* dependence.

Menzies (2004) considers the ability of Lewis’ influence theory to address the problem of profligate causation. And he argues that Lewis’ influence theory has no such advantage over

Lewis' original theory, for it similarly fails to tackle the distinction between causes and mere background conditions. Moreover, as Menzies notes, Lewis himself saw no such advantage for his influence theory.

Instead, Lewis' chief source of reply to the problem of profligate causation is in his appeal to the pragmatics of conversational implicature. Lewis maintains that any events or absences meeting the sufficient conditions specified by his theory for being a cause are, in reality, causes. That is, metaphysically, Lewis does not attempt to lessen the large amount of causes entailed by his theory. Rather, Lewis seeks to accommodate the intuitions motivating the problem of profligate causation by illustrating how certain causes, although quite real, can be inappropriate to mention in conversation: "There are ever so many reasons why it might be inappropriate to say something true. It might be irrelevant to the conversation, it might convey a false hint, it might be known already to all concerned...." (Lewis 2000: 196)

While this line of reply might get, at least initially, some traction in addressing the standard problem of profligate causation, it in no way touches Lewis' special problem of profligate causation. Unlike the standard problem, Lewis' special problem of profligate causation does not rest in any way on intuitions suggesting that the extensive list of causes entailed by Lewis' view wrongly counts certain things as causes. Instead, the focus is on how the list includes causes that are inconsistent with Lewis' modal realism. Thus, appeal to the pragmatics of conversational implicature in order to defend Lewis' list of causes against commonsense judgments or intuitions does nothing at all to address this new version of the problem of profligate causation.

Lewis' argument for the causal isolation of possible worlds

As previously indicated, Lewis takes possible worlds to be isolated both spatiotemporally and causally. Spatiotemporal isolation serves, for Lewis, as a principle of demarcation for worlds. However, when it comes to causal isolation, Lewis argues that such isolation follows from his counterfactual analysis of causation. Let us turn, then, to Lewis' argument against trans-world causation to see if it can address his special problem of profligate causation.²

First, Lewis calls our attention to how, on his counterfactual account, causation occurs within a world:

We have a world W where event C causes event E . Both these events occur at W , and they are distinct events, and it is the case at W that if C had not occurred, E would not have occurred either. The counterfactual means that at the closest worlds to W at which C does not occur, E does not occur either. (Lewis 1986: 78)

Lewis then challenges:

Try to adapt this to a case of trans-world causation, in which the events of one world supposedly influence those of another. Event C occurs at world W_C , event E occurs at world W_E , they are distinct events, and if C had not occurred, E would not have occurred either. This counterfactual is supposed to hold – where? It means that at the closest worlds to – where? – at which C does not occur, E does not occur – where? – either. (Lewis 1986: 78)

² Note that Lewis does say, “If need be, I would put this causal isolation alongside spatiotemporal isolation as a principle of demarcation for worlds” (Lewis 1986: 78). And Lewis takes this need to be avoided by his appeal to his counterfactual analysis of causation. Thus, if his appeal to his counterfactual analysis of causation fails to secure causal isolation, then causal isolation would presumably be stipulated as a principle of demarcation. In which case, a great deal rests on whether or not Lewis' argument against trans-world causation can address his special problem of profligate causation, for if it cannot, then causal isolation becomes a principle of demarcation for worlds and the problem of profligate causation then threatens to collapse all of Lewis' possible worlds into one large world.

In the case where causation occurs within a world, it is clear how one is to fill in the corresponding "where?" questions. But, argues Lewis, there are no such satisfactory answers in the case of trans-world causation.³

While Lewis' argument might very well rule out trans-world causation by way of *event* causation, it is not so effective with respect to *absence* causation. Recall, for example, Santa's causal responsibility for my lawn wilting, where Santa exists in W_S and the wilting of my lawn occurs in W_A . On Lewis' account of absence causation, Santa's causal responsibility by omission follows from the truth of the following counterfactual:

SC: If Santa Clause had watered my lawn, then my lawn would not have wilted.

And there is no special problem here in answering Lewis' corresponding "where?" questions.

That is, SC holds at W_A . And SC means that at the closest worlds to W_A at which Santa waters my lawn, the wilting of my lawn does not occur. Thus, the worlds relevant to the truth of SC are just as easy to identify as are the worlds relevant to the truth of Lewis' counterfactual in his case of event causation within a world.

Now, if Santa were claimed to be causally responsible for the wilting of my lawn due to participation in a causally efficacious *event* that occurs in W_S , then it would be difficult to meet Lewis' challenge in defending such trans-world causation. However, in our case of trans-world causation, Santa's causal responsibility is not due to any such participation in an event. Rather, it is due to Santa's omission, or failure to participate in an event. That is, on Lewis' account of absence causation, Santa's causal responsibility holds in virtue of Santa failing to water my lawn and SC being true. And, again, there is no difficulty at all in determining the worlds relevant to the truth of SC. Thus, by focusing on absence causation, one can meet Lewis' challenge to

³ For the details of Lewis' argument, see Lewis 1986: 78-80. There, he evaluates various, potential answers to his "where?" questions.

specify with possible-world semantics a true counterfactual that, on Lewis' counterfactual theory of causation, yields trans-world causation.

Appealing to an absence's location (or lack thereof)

According to Lewis (2004), absences are not genuine entities like events, which exist at certain times and places. When an effect is due to an absence, the effect results “not because of what *is* there, but because of what *isn't*” (Lewis 2004: 281). The result, according to Lewis, is the problem of the missing relatum for cases of absence causation. And Lewis' proposed solution is to abandon the idea that causation always involves a causal *relation* and, instead, to ground causation in the truth of certain counterfactuals, thereby avoiding the need to identify causal relata in all cases of causation.

Given Lewis' view on the location of absences, namely, that they don't have any, one might attempt to address Lewis' special problem of profligate causation the following way. On Lewis' view, Santa's failure to water my lawn is not located anywhere and, so, not located at W_S . But if Santa's failure to water my lawn is not located at W_S , then the causal efficacy of that failure cannot generate trans-world causation between W_S and W_A .

In response, consider absence causation within a world. On Lewis' view, my failure to water the lawn causes the lawn to wilt because it is true that had I watered the lawn, the lawn would not have wilted. And, consequently, I am causally responsible for my lawn wilting. I am causally responsible not, of course, in virtue of a causal relation that includes myself and the lawn as relata. Rather, my causal responsibility derives from what I did not do and the truth of a certain counterfactual concerning that omission. Thus, an object can be causally responsible by way of Lewisian absence causation even though the causally efficacious absence is not located where the object is (or anywhere else for that matter). Therefore, Santa's failure to water my lawn

need not be located at W_S (or anywhere else for that matter) in order for Santa at W_S to be causally responsible, by way of Lewisian absence causation, for my lawn wilting at W_A .

Conclusion

I have argued that the problem of profligate causation provides resources for exposing a tension between Lewis' acceptance of absence causation and his modal realism. And, unlike the standard version, this new version of the problem of profligate causation does not appeal to commonsense judgments or intuitions that conflict with Lewis' extensive list of causes. Rather, it challenges the internal consistency of Lewisian metaphysics, where that system includes modal realism and a counterfactual theory of causation that welcomes absence causation.

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