

Value Free Causation

A specter haunts the literature on causation, the specter of normativity. Causation, traditionally a natural relation (Strawson) – factual, in the world, and context-invariant – is now viewed as context-sensitive, even a matter of norms; or at least, causal judgments are said to involve normative judgments. But causation involves no such thing. Facts about what causes what, or which events or facts are causally linked, do not depend upon norms of any sort or context. True, causal judgments often mix in normative and contrastive features, but the correct conclusion from these phenomena is that they are not, strictly speaking, at least in these instances, judgments of causation at all. Getting this right is not merely a matter of explaining away and achieving empirical adequacy; the point, is that conflating all this under a unified category of non-natural, normative causation, even one that can be nicely modeled with directed graphs and structural equations, obscures important distinctions between acts and omissions, and between judgments of causation and judgments of responsibility that are parasitic upon them. It is not that causation is not unified – causation is unified, but causal judgments involve more than just causation. Causation is productive (Salmon, Dowe, Kistler, Hall, Machamer et al, Moore). Keeping causation clean and natural is both good metaphysics and good practice, allowing causation to do its work in scientific and moral theory.

Norms are all the rage in the empirical literature on causation and in the literature on causal modeling. Norms are said to be necessary to make sense of (judgments of) causation by omission (Thomson, McGrath), late preemption (Halpern & Pearl), and to the causal selection problem more generally (Hitchcock & Knobe, Kominsky & Phillips), especially regarding blame (Knobe & Shapiro). Without appeal to norms, whether ethical or statistical, and background assumptions, we cannot make sense of how a particular factor is picked out as the relevant factor for causal ascription, as against all other factors upon which the effect is counterfactually dependent, or upon which an intervention would make a difference. Agents reliably, and consistently, pick out some of these factors, excluding others, and yet, counterfactually, these factors seem on a par. It is norms that distinguish between them. This is most clearly shown in the case of so-called causation by omission, where the number of competing factors is profligate indeed (Beebe, Menzies, Gerstenberg & Stephen). Yet, this evidence is taken, rather than as an argument against causation by omission, or against the counterfactualist or interventionist frameworks in which it arises, as an argument for the normativity of causal judgments more generally.

The argumentative task of my paper will be to roll things back in the opposite direction, restoring causes and norms to their proper, distinct place. This task will not only clean up causal metaphysics, but will have normative import as well, since, as I argue, failing to distinguish between causation and omissive allowings, and more generally, conflating causation with judgments of responsibility, misses several key distinctions of moral significance, to which these models are blind.

Essentially, the relation picked out in the experimental and modeling literature is contrastive, normative, and context sensitive. But causation is none of these. Therefore, what these models are picking out is not causation.

Omissions, do in fact, require norms, contrasts, and contexts. They are best made sense of in terms of would-cause counterfactuals (Dowe), which are counterfactuals about causal relations. The salience of duties in omission judgments is a feature of the duties themselves (what the duty-bearer had a responsibility to deliver), involving no claim of causation at all. This explains, not merely, how “causation by omission” works, or how responsibility is possible for what we “cause” by omission, but also, why only those with a prior duty are responsible for the consequences of an omission (Billy is responsible for not watering the plants he promised to, but King Charles is not), while, with regular causation, no specific prior duty is required (there is no asymmetry between Billy and the King for responsibility for smashing the plant). This distinction is recognized in the law as well. This difference also underlies much of the normative distinctions between doing and allowing, and why harming (doing) with the aim of preventing greater harm (failure for which is harm allowed) is not straightforwardly permissible. It explains why I may have permission to abstain from pointless rescue, but not pile on to harmful behavior (even if my failing to participate would make no difference). The conclusion is that omissions are indeed normative, causes are not. Models (whether empirical or formal) that miss this, are missing their target. Perhaps this can be rectified in some models (Handfield et al, Wolff).

But, argue the normativists, it’s not just omissions. Regular causal judgments involve norms as well. We judge the professor who had no right to take the pen, not the administrator who rightfully took one, as the cause of the absence of pens. Notice that we are judging an absence as a causal relatum (already suspicious). We judge the car that ran the light as the cause of the collision, even though both cars were moving (Clarke, Henne, Coase). True, but this is a matter of blame. It is hardly a surprise that normative judgments about blame are going to involve norms. When A and B collide (or when A and B both take pens), but A has a right to do what she did, where B didn’t, of course we will blame B. This doesn’t mean that we need norms to judge the cause. We can see that both caused, but we distinguish between who had a right to cause and who did not.

No normativity is needed for the analysis of causation; keeping that analysis clean helps causation do its normative work.