

Lecture 3 Metaphysics or Expressivism

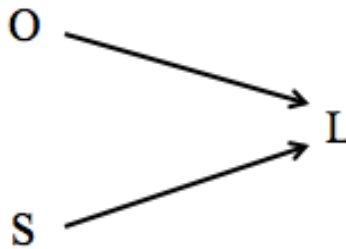
1. Woodward on Causal Models

Woodward gives a variation on a counterfactual account of causation, but one that is also informed by the observed relationship between manipulation and our concept of causation. He does this by way of the use of **causal models** and **structural equations**.

A causal model is composed of:

- (1) Event variables
- (2) Directed paths—'arrows'—representing the relations of causal influence between those events
- (3) A set of structural equations for the values of those variables (these equations *encode families of counterfactuals*)

E.g.



$O = 1$ if oxygen is present; 0 otherwise
 $S = 1$ if match is struck; 0 otherwise
 $L = 1$ if match lights; 0 otherwise
 $L = O \cdot S$

According to Woodward's (2003) **interventionism**, an event X is a cause of another event Y (on a model) iff an intervention on X corresponds to a change in the value of Y .

I is an **intervention** on X iff:

- I1. I causes X
- I2. Certain values of I are such that when I attains those values, X ceases to causally depend on the values of other variables that cause X and instead causally depends only on the value of I .
- I3. Any directed path from I to some effect Y goes through X .
- I4. I is statistically independent of any variable Z that causes Y and that is on a directed path that does not go through X

2. Woodward's Objections to Menzies and Price (1993)

Woodward expresses concern over just what Menzies & Price (1993) mean when they argue that causation must be understood in relation to our human perspective. What is it for causation to be a "projection" onto the world?

Consider this passage from Woodward:

[...] there may be a limited respect in which [if human beings did not exist or had different beliefs, attitudes or experiences, then the truth values of causal claims would be different]. [...] However, [...] the counterfactuals on which causal claims are based seem to be true or false in a mind-independent way, even if it is true that the causal claims themselves reflect additional [factors dependent on us]. Consider, for example, the hypothetical experiment in which I step in front of a speeding bus. Whether I will be injured in such an experiment does not depend, either causally or in some other way, on my beliefs or desires. (118-119)

Woodward takes it that there must be something about the world that makes the truth-values of our causal claims come out the way they do. Our causal claims may depend *in part* on our beliefs and experiences. But they must *also* depend on facts about the world. Otherwise, he argues, we couldn't make sense of our experimental practices.

If the "objective" core of the content of the claim that X causes Y is just the claim that X and Y are correlated and all else is the product of some agent's projective activities, what sense can we make of experiments designed to distinguish the claim that X causes Y from the claim that they are correlated because of the operation of some common cause? Are such experiments simply roundabout ways of finding out about the experimenter's (or the scientific community's) projective activities? [...] Why should we and other animals go to the trouble of distinguishing between causal and correlational relationships if all that is "really out there" in the world are correlations? All that projecting seems wasteful and gratuitous. (119, 121)

He argues that, when we decide to bring about some X in order to make Y happen, it is a *presupposition* of our decision that there must be an independently existing relationship between X and Y that we can exploit such that making X happen will make Y happen. Indeed, on Woodward's view, it is the distinction between causation and correlation itself which explains "why organisms have the different beliefs, attitudes, and expectations regarding causal and noncausal sequences that they do" (121).

3. **Price (2018) – Renouncing Metaphysics**

Notice that Woodward's objections fit neatly into the categories of objections identified by Menzies and Price (1993). Price revisits these in his reply to Woodward.

(1) **Epistemology confused with Metaphysics**

Here, Price responds to Woodward and others by denying that he is engaged in the metaphysics of causation at all.

[I explicitly] disavow that the project of the agency theory should be seen as metaphysics in the first place. Rather, it should be seen as what I have sometimes called philosophical anthropology: the task of explaining why creatures like in our situation come to speak and think in certain ways—in this case, in ways that involve causal concepts. (p.3 [N.B. Citations from preprint])

The general strategy here will mark many of Price's replies to Woodward.

(2) **Vicious Circularity**

Price emphasises that, when the agency theory is understood as 'philosophical anthropology', this objection loses traction. He distinguishes between the *theorist's* perspective and the perspective of concept users. He then argues that:

It is no problem at all if we theorists characterise [the behaviour of concept-users] in causal terms, so long as the subjects themselves don't need to do so in order to get the linguistic behaviour in question off the ground. [...] provided we are focussing on use, on what speakers need to implicitly know how to do, it is no problem at all if our theoretical characterisation of the practical capacities concerned itself employs some sophisticated descendant of the very concept whose origins are in question. (p.5, original emphasis)

(3) **Anthropocentricity**

Price denies that the agency theory makes causation mind-dependent in the way that Woodward suggests it does. He draws an analogy with the concept of a 'foreigner'. From this analogy he makes two observations:

i) Causation, like foreignness, is perspectival.

In the case of foreignness, just who is considered a foreigner depends on one's perspective. But it still also depends on mind-independent facts, such as group-membership. In the case of causation, just what is considered a cause depends on one's (agentive) perspective. This is not inconsistent with its depending on mind-independent facts as well.

ii) Causation, like foreignness, is “interest-relative”.

In the case of foreignness, there would have been no such concept at all if we weren't “tribal” – i.e. if we didn't have a tendency to divide ourselves into in-groups and out-groups. In the case of causation, there would have been no such *concept* at all if we weren't agents – i.e. if we didn't manipulate things and deliberate about those manipulations.

At this point, Price argues, the response to the charge that our “projecting” of these concepts onto the world is “wasteful and gratuitous” is straightforward. As long as you allow that our concepts have functions other than representing what's “out there”, there is a place for our use of the concept of causation. And when you observe other parts of our language, it's clear that we regularly accept other such uses.

[...] we need only think about the case of secondary qualities, or of ‘perspectival’ asymmetries such as there-here, past-present, you-me, or foreigner-local. None of these properties or asymmetries are simply ‘there’ in the world, visible from a ‘God’s-eye’ point of view. They all reflect our viewpoint, or ‘location’, in one way or another. But there is no mystery about why we have evolved them. (15)

However, it is worth noting that there isn't a clear account in Price (2018) of what the function of our concept of causation is. He gestures at the possible origins of our concept, but there is reason to think that this cannot suffice for an account of the function of our modern-day concept.

(4) Unmanipulable Causes

Price's argument here is that his theory and Woodward's are companions in guilt. Woodward also has to provide some way of accounting for causal claims about events on which we couldn't possibly intervene. In this case, either Woodward will also (as Menzies and Price originally proposed) have to appeal to non-causal similarities between those events and events on which we can intervene, or he too will face this objection.

In fact, Price argues, matters are *worse* for Woodward insofar as the latter wants to provide a metaphysics of causation (rather than an account of our concept). He presents Woodward's “objectivist” with a dilemma: either there are extension principles (from the manipulable to the unmanipulable), or there are not. In the former case, those principles will be just as good for the subjectivist. In the latter case, the objectivist will be vulnerable to scepticism: without any extension principles, the objectivist provides no good reason for thinking there are causal relations between unmanipulable events at all.