

CHAPTER 7

Causal Explanations

In the previous chapter I outlined a non-relational metaphysics of causation. According to this theory, causation is not always and everywhere a relation but can be a process that substances engage in. I presented a novel metaphysical framework, which includes processes, conceived of as universals, in its ontology. This metaphysical framework gives content to the claim that causation can be something substances engage in, rather than merely an external relation holding between events (or any other particulars). In the following chapters I will argue that this alternative way of thinking about causation, and the ontology that permits it, allows us to put together a new theory of intentional action and the mental causation associated with it. The ultimate aim of this theory will be to show that it is possible to reject the relational understanding of mental causation: as-a-cause is not how we should understand the place of mentality in intentional action. Intentional action does not entail the existence of causal relations between mental items and physical events.

It is commonly held that we can achieve an adequate account of what it is to act intentionally by examining the distinctive sort of explanation with which intentional actions are associated. Part of what makes intentional action distinctive is that we can explain why someone acted intentionally by giving their reason for acting as they did. Such explanations are called ‘rationalising explanations’. Therefore, the path to concluding that intentional action does not involve causal relations between mental items and physical events involves challenging Davidson’s claim that ‘the primary reason for an action is its cause’ (1963/2001: 4). We saw in Chapter 2 that there were two parts to the conclusion of Davidson’s (1963) argument concerning rationalising explanations. First, rationalising explanations give causal information. Second, rationalising explanations are true if and only if the belief or desire that explains the action stands in a causal relation to the action explained. We also saw that construing rationalising explanations as explanations that

How to cite this book chapter:

White, Andrea. 2024. *Understanding Mental Causation*. Pp. 141–154. York: White Rose University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22599/White.h>. License: CC BY-NC 4.0

posit an entity that is causally related to the action explained encourages us to accept an ontology that includes mental items that stand in causal relations to human actions. If we also assume that actions are physical events, for example bodily movements, then Davidson's position entails the relational understanding of mental causation.

Davidson's view that states of desiring and states of believing are causes of the actions they explain has been challenged before. Non-causalists reject the idea that beliefs and desires stand to actions as causes to effects. On this view, concepts like *belief*, *desire* and *intention* do not refer to items that can stand in causal relations to actions or physical events, so when such concepts are employed to explain why an agent acted they do not designate inner causes of the action they explain. However, non-causalists reach this conclusion by arguing that rationalising explanations of intentional actions are not causal explanations at all. In other words, non-causalists reject the second of Davidson's conclusions by rejecting the first.

Even though I agree with non-causalists that concepts like *belief*, *desire* and *intention* do not signify or denote inner causes of the actions they explain, I believe that rationalising explanations of intentional actions do give causal information. Fortunately, this kind of view, which is intermediary between Davidsonians and non-causalists, is made possible if one rejects the relational approach to causation. In this chapter, I show that it is not necessary for an explanation to be causal that its explanandum designate an effect and its explanans designate an item that is the cause of that effect. My non-relational theory of causation implies that facts about causal relations between events are not the only causal facts that causal explanations could answer to. I suggest that some causal explanations are made true by the non-relational aspect of causal reality, that is, by facts about substances engaging in processes. In Chapter 8, I will argue that explanations of intentional action that cite the agent's reasons for acting are the kind of causal explanation that are not made true by causally related events and explain why this position is preferable to the non-causalist position.

7.1 Four counterexamples to the Davidsonian view

Davidsonians and non-causalists alike assume that causal explanations are precisely those explanations whose explanandum designates an effect and whose explanans designates an item that is the cause of that effect. William Child describes the Davidsonian view as follows:

The general idea, then, is that the truth (or acceptability) of a causal explanation rests on the presence of appropriate relations of causation. And a natural thought would be to put the point in the following way: a causal explanation is one whose explanatory power depends on

the assumption that there are events mentioned, or pointed to, in the explanans and explanandum sentences, between which the natural relation of causation obtains; and whose truth (or acceptability) requires that the relation does indeed obtain. (1994: 102)

This view assumes that a causal *explanation* is the statement of a non-natural, intentional relationship that holds between true propositions. The causal *relation*, in contrast, is a natural, extensional relation that ‘holds in the natural world between *particular events or circumstances*, just as the relation of temporal succession does or that of spatial proximity’ (Strawson 1985: 115, emphasis added). This theory does not demand that the events, whose causal connectedness grounds the truth of a causal explanation, should be *explicitly* referred to or mentioned by the sentences that form the explanandum and explanans of the causal explanation, or that the explanandum and explanans sentences can be transformed into sentences that involve explicit quantification over events.²⁹ As Child notes, ‘the fact that, in some (or even most) cases, reference to causally related events is concealed is compatible with the idea that the truth of an explanation depends on the presence of appropriate relations to causality between particular events’ (1994: 102). However, the assumption is that it is necessary for an explanation to be causal that its explanandum designate an effect and its explanans designate an item that is the cause of that effect.

I will outline four kinds of counterexample to the Davidsonian view of what makes explanations causal. Then I will show why these causal explanations are best understood as being made true by the non-relational aspect of causal reality, that is, by facts about substances engaging in processes.

7.1.1 Negative causal explanations

The first counterexamples to the Davidsonian view are negative causal explanations, i.e. causal explanations where either the explanans or the explanandum, or both, is a fact about an event failing to occur.

- (a) Don did not die because his rope did not break. (Child 1994: 106)
- (b) The water swept away the fish because the sluice gate did not shut.
- (c) The policeman was not hurt because the bullet got stuck in his Kevlar vest.

²⁹ The process of transforming a sentence like “Roger ran a mile” into a sentence that explicitly quantifies over an event (“Roger’s running of a mile”) is a process Mourelatos calls ‘nominalisation transcription’. Nominalisation transcription is discussed in Section 6.2.2.

On the Davidsonian view, these explanations are causal explanations if and only if they are made true by a causally related pair of events. But in (a) it seems like no events are mentioned or pointed to by the explanation, in (b) the explanans clause does not seem to mention an event, and in (c) the explanandum clause does not seem to mention an event. One could respond by positing ‘negative events’. This allows one to argue that in fact the explanans clauses and the explanandum clauses of (a)–(c) do all explicitly mention events whose causal connections serve as truth-makers for the explanations. However, as I argued in Section 4.1.2, on any theory that takes seriously the idea that events are happenings, something’s not-happening cannot be an event.³⁰

A more plausible response to negative causal explanations is suggested by Child. Child suggests that the Davidsonian could potentially accommodate negative causal explanations within his account of causal explanations by allowing the relation between a causal explanation and the causally related events that make the explanation true to be opaque (1994: 106). The Davidsonian position is safe if the truth of negative causal explanations depends on there being causal relations between events; it is not necessary that the negative causal explanation itself mention the causally related pairs of events that make it true. The idea would be that “Don did not die because his rope did not break” succeeds as an explanation only because rope-breakings are causally related to deaths when they occur in circumstances similar to Don’s—the explanation depends for its truth on causal relations between rope-breakings and deaths. Another way of putting this point is to say that negative causal explanations are true when they are backed by a causal law—i.e. a generalisation that says that events of one type always (or usually) cause events of another type to occur.³¹ This response is structurally similar to Clarke’s (2014) account of how the intentionality of refrainment still depends on mental states causing actions even though refrainments themselves are the absence of an action and therefore not the sort of thing that can be caused.

There is nothing wrong with the idea that the relation between an explanation and what makes the explanation true can be opaque. As Kevin Mulligan, Peter Simons and Barry Smith put it, it is ‘perfectly normal for us to know *that* a sentence is true, and yet not know completely *what* makes it true’ (1984:

³⁰ See Mele (2005) for further reasons to reject negative events.

³¹ Beebe (2004) offers another solution. Beebe proposes negative causal explanations provide information about the causal structure of the closest possible worlds where the events that failed to occur in the actual world did occur. So “Don did not die because the rope did not break” would tell us about the causal sequence that would have resulted had Don’s rope broken. Negative causal explanations thus provide modal information. This solution is compatible with the Davidsonian view of causal explanations, although, as Beebe admits, it also does not prove that the Davidsonian view must be correct.

299). However, it seems odd to me to suggest that the truth of a negative causal explanation should depend on causal relations between events that take place somewhere else (perhaps even on causal relations between events that take place in non-actual possible worlds, because, even if no rope-breakings had ever occurred, and so no-one had ever died as a result of one, “Don did not die because his rope did not break” could still be true, and a Davidsonian might say this is because if some rope-breakings had occurred, these events *would* have caused deaths). It seems to me that the truth of negative causal explanations should depend on something within the causal system the causal explanation concerns. So, for example, “Don did not die because his rope did not break” should depend, for its truth, on Don, or something about Don—or the rope, or something about the rope. This is not a decisive objection against the response Child gives on behalf of the Davidsonian. Indeed, of the four kinds of counterexample I discuss in this chapter, negative causal explanations seem to me to be the least problematic for the Davidsonian view. However, it does highlight a cost of the Davidsonian view: on the Davidsonian view some causal explanations are made true by causally related events that occur outside the circumstances the causal explanation specifically concerns.

7.1.2 Process-citing explanations

A second group of counterexamples to the Davidsonian view is causal explanations that cite the continuous operation of causal processes, such as:

- (d) The snow is melting because the sun is shining.

Are causal explanations like (d) made true by causally related pairs of events? As Alexander Mourelatos (1978) argues, process predications, of which “the snow is melting” and “the sun is shining” are examples do not implicitly quantify over events. So, (d) does not say that a melting event was caused by a shining event. The tense of (d) indicates that melting and shining are still going on, so it is not completed events but ongoing processes that the explanation references. Nevertheless, it may well be true that whenever the sun melts some snow by shining on it causal relations between events always obtain. For example, it might be that whenever the sun melts some snow by shining on it a series of causally related chemical events involving light particles and ice molecules occur. Perhaps it is *these* causally connected events on which the truth of (d) depends.

In most cases, when we say some causal process is in operation, we can find pairs of causally related events occurring at a finer temporal resolution. However, the vocabulary that we use to express the original causal explanation does not indicate what pairs of causally related events we should expect to find. For example, it is not part of the *meaning* of ‘shining’ or ‘melting’ that instances of

shining or melting involve causally related pairs of events of certain types.³² It might be necessary that whenever the sun melts some snow by shining on it a series of causally related chemical events involving light particles and ice molecules occur, but this is an *a posteriori* necessity. The idea that an explanation must be made true by causally related events falling under types which have no connection to the *meaning* of the predications featuring in the explanation seems contrary to the reasonable principle that whatever makes some sentence true should be what the sentence is about. The notion of what a sentence is about is imprecise. Possibly, a Davidsonian could argue that, on a loose enough definition of 'aboutness', (d) is about events involving light particles and ice molecules. However, for this response to work, the Davidsonian would have to convince us to adopt his loose definition of 'aboutness'.

If one thought, as seems reasonable, that explanations are causal if and only if they answer to causal reality, and that all there is to causal reality is events standing in causal relations to other events, then it would be natural to suppose that (d) *must* depend for its truth on causally related pairs of events, if it is a causal explanation at all. However, as I argued in Chapter 6, one need not think of causation as always, everywhere a relation between events. Causation can be a determinable process engaged in by substances. If this view of causation is plausible, then facts about what events are causally related to what others are not the only causal facts that causal explanations could answer to. Some causal explanations may answer to facts about dynamic states of affairs. Furthermore, the idea that (d) is made true by facts about a dynamic state of affairs has intuitive appeal. What seems to matter for the truth of (d) is that it is the sun that is causing what the snow is suffering.

7.1.3 Stative causal explanations

A third group of counterexamples to the Davidsonian view are stative causal explanations. Here are three examples:

- (e) The bridge collapsed because the bolt was weak. (Child 1994: 106)
- (f) The floor is dirty because Mary's dog was here.
- (g) My leg is broken because I fell off my bike. (Child 1994: 105)

These examples are problematic for the Davidsonian view because in each of them either the explanans clause or the explanandum clause, or both, seems to reference a state, not an event. In (e), that an event occurred is explained by the fact that a state obtains; in (f), that one state obtains is explained by the fact that another state obtained; and, in (g), that a state obtains is explained by the fact that an event occurred.

³² Child (1994: 108) makes a similar point.

Once again, the Davidsonian can respond by stressing that reference to the events, whose causal connectedness grounds the truth of the causal explanation, can be concealed. The reply would go like this: when we talk of a state as the cause of some event, ‘there is a causal relation between events; the state [is] part of the circumstances in which the cause occurred; and mentioning that state can help to explain why the cause had the effect it did’ (Child 1994: 106). So, in the case of (e), something happened to cause the collapse of the bridge (e.g. a train went over the bridge); the bolt’s being weak was part of the circumstances in which this event occurred and helps explain why the event caused the collapse of the bridge. Similarly, when someone offers “the floor is dirty because Mary’s dog was here” as a causal explanation, we can suppose that events occurred that stand in causal relations to each other (e.g. Mary’s dog arrived, then ran around the room with muddy feet, and this latter event caused the floor to become dirty) and these causally related events are what makes the stative causal explanation true. And, in (g), the causal explanation is made true by the causal relation obtaining between my falling off my bike and my leg breaking.

However, to suppose that whenever we offer a stative causal explanation there *must* be appropriate pairs of causally related events to serve as the grounds for the stative causal explanation seems to me to be metaphysically suspect. Events are not included in our ontology for the sole reason that they serve as truth-makers for causal explanations. Whether or not certain events exist and stand in causal relations, and whether or not a certain stative causal explanation is true, can therefore be determined independently. ‘Was there an event that triggered the collapse of the bridge?’ and ‘did the bridge collapse because the bolt was weak?’ seem like independent questions, in the sense that an answer to the first need not impact an answer to the second and vice versa. Confidence in the truth of the stative causal explanation should not, therefore, govern the truth of a claim about what events exist. Steward (1997: 173–174) also questions the assumption that appropriate pairs of causally related events can always be found to serve as the grounds for a stative causal explanation. In the bridge case, for example, what if the bridge just collapsed, apparently spontaneously? Must we always assume there was a triggering event that stands to the event explained as cause to effect?

7.1.4 *Disposition-citing explanations*

Stative causal explanations for which Steward’s point seems particularly pertinent are stative explanations that seem to cite powers or dispositions. Indeed, (e) probably counts as a disposition-citing explanation. Other examples of disposition-citing explanations include:

- (h) Peter sneezed because he is allergic to flowers.
- (i) The cat died after eating the lilies because they are poisonous to cats.
- (j) The aspirin relieved Joe’s pain because it is a cyclo-oxygenase inhibitor.

It is possible that all stative causal explanations are disposition-citing explanations. For example, if it could be argued that (1) all stative predications attribute properties, and (2) all properties are really powers or dispositions, then it would follow that all stative causal explanations are really disposition-citing causal explanations. However, both of these premises are controversial.³³ I will not attempt to establish that all stative causal explanations are really disposition-citing explanations but I will assume that *some* stative causal explanations are disposition-citing explanations. I will also assume that disposition-citing explanations are causal explanations. As John Hyman puts it:

[E]xplanations that refer to disposition are *echt* causal explanations, whatever kind of disposition they refer to. *How* they explain, exactly what part of a causal story they tell, and whether a disposition is the cause, or part of the cause, of its manifestation—these are contentious questions. But *that* explanations that refer to dispositions are causal explanations should be beyond doubt. (2015: 121)

Do disposition-citing explanations depend for their truth on the obtaining of causal relations between events? One might think that disposition-citing explanations are causal because they report causal relations between the triggering or stimulus event of the manifestation and the manifestation event. So, for example, perhaps (h) “Peter sneezed because he is allergic to flowers” reports a causal relation between Peter moving near to a flower (the trigger event) and Peter’s sneeze (the manifestation event). For many dispositions, when they are manifested, causal relations between trigger and manifestation exist. Indeed, if they did not we might wonder whether the disposition has really been manifested at all. If there were no causal relation between Peter’s moving near a flower and his sneeze, we might doubt that his sneezing was really a manifestation of his allergy. This is because to have an allergy is to be liable to exhibiting an immune reaction in the presence of an allergen—it is part of the meaning of ‘allergy’ that allergic reactions have specific triggers.

However, there are two problems with this suggestion. First, some dispositions do not seem to have triggers at all, either because they are always manifested (e.g. the disposition of a massive body to deform space-time) or because their manifestation is spontaneous (e.g. radioactive decay). Explanations that make reference to these sorts of dispositions therefore will not be made true by causal relations between triggers and manifestations, and, on the assumption that all disposition-citing explanations have the same sort of truth-maker, this casts doubt on the idea that disposition-citing explanations are made true by trigger-manifestation causal relations. Second, it is possible for there to be a causal relation between two events, the first of which is of

³³ Mumford (2004), Shoemaker (1980) and Whittle (2008) are three philosophers who have defended (2); Armstrong (1997: 69–84) has argued against it.

the same type as the trigger of a disposition's manifestation and the second of which is of the same type as a disposition's manifestation, without the disposition being manifested at all. For example, suppose the flower Peter moves near is bright white in colour, and the bright light reflected off the flower induces a photic sneeze reflex in Peter and he sneezes. In this example, moving near the flower caused Peter to sneeze, but his disposition to exhibit an immune response to flowers wasn't manifested. For all dispositions where the manifestation of a disposition involves a series of causally related events starting with a triggering event and ending with a manifestation event, it is possible for this type of causal chain to obtain without the disposition being manifested, because the causal chain is 'deviant' in some way.³⁴ This throws into doubt the idea that causal relations between trigger events and manifestation events are what disposition-citing explanations report.

One might think that disposition-citing explanations are made true by causal relations holding between the dispositions themselves and the events explained. However, I reject this suggestion because I do not think that dispositions or powers can be causal relata. A number of philosophers have doubted that dispositions or powers themselves can be causally efficacious. Debate about the causal efficacy or causal relevance of dispositions mirrors the debate about the causal efficacy or causal relevance of mental states. Frank Jackson (1995: 257) argues that, because part of what it is for a substance to possess a disposition, like 'fragility', is for that substance to be prone to exhibit the manifestation behaviour, this entails that the disposition is non-contingently connected to the manifestation behaviour. And, because the connection between cause and effect is contingent, this entails that the connection between disposition and manifestation cannot be causal. This parallels Abraham Melden's (1961: 52) objection to the idea that desires are causes of actions: desires are non-contingently related to actions that satisfy the desire. Elizabeth Prior, Robert Pargetter and Frank Jackson (1982) argued that dispositions lack causal efficacy because there is always a 'causal basis' of the disposition—i.e. there is always a 'property or property-complex of the object that, together with the [triggering or stimulus event] is the causally operative sufficient condition for the manifestation in the case of "surefire" dispositions, and in the case of probabilistic dispositions is causally sufficient for relevant chance of the manifestation' (1982: 251). According to Prior, Pargetter and Jackson, this means that there is no 'causal work' left for the disposition to do (unless the manifestation event is overdetermined). This argument parallels Jaegwon Kim's causal exclusion argument, discussed in Chapter 1. And, just as philosophers have responded to Kim by questioning assumptions about what it means for a mental property or state to be causally relevant, philosophers have responded to Prior, Pargetter and Jackson by questioning assumptions about what it means for a disposition be causally relevant (e.g. McKittrick 2005).

³⁴ Hyman argues for this point (2015: 121–127).

However, I think that the debate about the causal efficacy or causal relevance of powers/dispositions is often misconceived. In Chapter 6, I expressed support for the Rylean view that powers are not *things*; they are not ‘elements of being’, to borrow a phrase from E. J. Lowe (2005). In Ryle’s view, to attribute a power to an entity is not to report a state of affairs; it is not to say that the entity has some attribute or stands in some relation. For an entity to have a power is for an open-ended set of facts about what that substance can do, or can be relied upon to do—what processes it can engage in—to be true of it. Powers are ways of thinking about how substances are connected to the processes they engage in. In this respect, *power* is a concept that does not name any kind of being but instead helps us explain the ontological form of entities belonging to the categories the concept concerns. If this view is correct, and for a substance to have a power is not for it to have a certain attribute or stand in a certain relation, then powers (or the state of having a power) cannot be related to *any* relation, let alone a causal relation. Arguments like Prior, Pargetter and Jackson’s only have bite if one assumes that powers are the sorts of entities that even could ‘do causal work’—and I do not think powers or dispositions are the sorts of entities that even could ‘do causal work’, because I do not think they are any sort of entity at all.

If one thought that causal reality were nothing but events standing in causal relations, then explanations that make reference to dispositions, if they are causal at all, would have to depend for their truth on the obtaining of certain types of causal relations. However, if the non-relationalist view of causation put forward in Chapter 6 is plausible, then causal reality is more than events standing in causal relations to other events; it is also a matter of substances engaging in processes. The idea that it is something about this latter aspect of causal reality that disposition-citing explanations answer to is plausible. On the non-relational theory of causation I outlined in Chapter 6, what it is for a substance to be exercising a power, or manifesting a disposition, is for that substance to be engaging in a process. Therefore, the obvious candidate for what a disposition-citing explanation reports is the fact that some dynamic state of affairs is a manifestation of the disposition cited. In other words, disposition-citing explanations depend for their truth on the relationship between the disposition cited and the dynamic state of affairs that is the manifestation of that disposition.

7.2 Causal explanations and manipulation

We have seen that some causal explanations—namely negative causal explanations, causal explanations that cite the operation of causal processes, stative causal explanations, and disposition-citing causal explanations—do not explicitly mention events whose causal connectedness could ground their truth. In the face of causal explanations like this, the Davidsonian is forced to maintain that reference to the causally related events that make true a causal explanation

can be opaque. This suggestion is not implausible itself, but in the case of negative causal explanations and causal explanations that cite the operation of causal processes it threatens to contravene the reasonable assumption that what makes a sentence true must be what the sentence is about. Furthermore, even this response seems insufficient in the case of stative causal explanations and disposition-citing explanations. This is because, for at least some stative causal explanations and disposition-citing explanations, it is not obvious that causally related pairs of events can be found to serve as implicit referents of explanandum and explanans.

Child suggests that, in the face of counterexamples like those discussed in Section 7.1, we could 'give up the idea that what makes an explanation a causal explanation is its dependence on the presence of causal relations between events' (1994: 109). There is more than one way to do this. First, we can give up this idea *without* giving up the idea that what makes an explanation causal is its dependence on the presence of causal relations of some other kind (perhaps between states). Second, we can deny that what makes an explanation a causal explanation is its dependence on the presence of causal relations of *any* kind—what unites causal explanations into a single category is something else, perhaps a fact about the sort of information they provide.

Some of Child's remarks suggest that he has sympathy for the second option. He describes the alternative to the Davidsonian account as a view where 'causal explanations are not united by their dependence on a natural relation of causality, but rather by the fact that they are all explanations of the occurrence or persistence of particular events or circumstances, or of general types of event or circumstance' (1994: 100). In any case, it should be obvious that I prefer the second option. I concede that causal explanations depend for their truth on an underlying causal reality, but this underlying reality need not involve any causal *relations*—some causal explanations are not grounded by the presence of any causal relation at all. Instead, I think that explanations are causal because of the sort of information they provide.

In Chapter 6, I discussed an objection to my view that we think of causation in two distinct ways, as a process and separately as a cause–effect relation. According to this objection, the idea that we think of causation in two different ways is inconsistent with the idea that causation is a single phenomenon. I responded to this objection by maintaining that the concept of causation as a cause–effect relation is derived from our concept of causation as a process that substances engage in. I noted that, if substances possess and exercise causal powers, then substances with certain powers must behave in certain ways when the conditions for the manifestation of the power arise, provided there is nothing interfering. The exercise of powers will therefore be the source of regular and stable relations between trigger events and manifestation events. We can use knowledge of these relations to change how powerful substances behave. For example, if one knows that being near flowers triggers an allergic reaction, then one can prevent the allergic reaction by avoiding flowers.

From this we get the idea that events, particularly (but not exclusively) trigger events, can be *devices* for manipulating later events. Events are not literally devices but, even though talk of events as devices is metaphorical, there are still conditions under which use of this metaphor is correct and conditions under which use of this metaphor is incorrect. The metaphor is thus the source of the idea that there is a special sort of relation between events, which is causation. So, the causation concept can cover ontologically diverse phenomena, because from the concept of causing as something substances engage in, we can derive the idea that some relations between events are causal, via the intermediary notion of using knowledge of stable relations between trigger events and manifestation events to manipulate powerful substances.

The notion of manipulation thus ties the concepts of causation as a process and causation as a relation together. I suggest that the notion of manipulation is also what explains how many diverse explanations can all count as causal. Causal explanations are those that provide information relevant to the manipulation of an effect. They are explanations that provide us with information about how to stop something from happening, or how to get something to happen again, or how to get it to happen in a different way (or at least information about how to make such outcomes more likely). These criteria for an explanation to be causal are similar to criteria suggested by Bradford Skow (2013). Skow claims that ‘A body of facts partially causally explains E if it is a body of facts about what causes, if any, E had; or if it is a body of facts about what it would have taken for some specific alternative or range of alternatives to E to have occurred instead’ (2013: 449). Skow defends this theory of causal explanation on the grounds that there are many explanations that provide causal information but which do not name an event that stands in a causal relation to the explanandum.

One might argue that my proposal gives conditions that are unnecessary for an explanation to be causal, because there are some causal explanations where the named causal factor cannot be manipulated even in principle. For example, one might think that “Fido is warm-blooded because he’s a dog” and “Sarah didn’t get promoted because she’s a woman” are causal explanations.³⁵ It is impossible to consider whether or not Fido would have been cold-blooded had he not been a dog, because any possible being that is not a dog is not Fido; similarly, it is impossible to consider whether or not Sarah would have got promoted had she not been a woman, because any possible being who is not a woman is not Sarah, or so the thought goes. For this reason, these cannot be examples of explanations that give information relevant to the manipulation or control of an effect.

In response to the first example, it is not obvious to me that this explanation is a causal explanation at all. Fido’s being warm-blooded is not *causally* explained by his being a dog—being warm-blooded is part and parcel of what it is to be

³⁵ Holland considers examples of this kind, arguing that if these really are causal claims then they are causal claims that lack a clear meaning (1986: 954–956).

a dog. The second example, in contrast, does seem to me to be a causal explanation. However, it is not obvious that Sarah's gender is an essential property of her, so it is not obvious that any possible being who is not a woman is not Sarah. Furthermore, even if Sarah's gender were an essential property of her, I would argue that social categories like gender, race and class (and perhaps also categories like criminal, employee, preacher, grandmother etc.) are peculiar in that the dispositional properties one enjoys or suffers as a result of being placed into one or other of these categories only exist because of certain cultural practices and behaviour. Sarah's being a woman is a causal factor in the explanation of her not getting promoted, but only because, as a society, we are liable to treat people differently when they fall into different social categories. So, even granting that Sarah's gender is not, even in principle, something we can manipulate, the cultural practices and behaviours that turn being a woman into a causal factor in the first place are certainly things we can manipulate. In other words, "Sarah didn't get promoted because she's a woman" is an explanation that provides information relevant to manipulation of an effect after all, because of the peculiar connection between social categories and changeable cultural practices. Of course, exactly how social categories function is a debated topic, but this only emphasises the point that "Sarah didn't get promoted because she's a woman" is not an uncontroversial counterexample to my proposal.³⁶

In this chapter, I have sought to show that it is not obviously true that an explanation is causal only if its explanandum designates an effect and its explanans designates an item that is the cause of that effect. My non-relational theory of causation allows that some causal explanations may depend for their truth on facts about dynamic states of affairs. Furthermore, it is quite plausible that process-citing explanations and disposition-citing explanations are the kinds of causal explanation that answer to the non-relational aspect of causal reality. In other words, it is plausible that the 'because' of these causal explanations does not signify the obtaining of a causal relation.

References³⁷

- Armstrong, D M 1997 *A world of states of affairs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beebe, H 2004 Causing and nothingness. In: Collins, J, Hall E J and Paul, L A, *Causation and counterfactuals*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. pp. 291–308.
- Child, W 1994 *Causality, interpretation, and the mind*. New York: Oxford University Press.

³⁶ See Woodward (2003: 114–117) for a good discussion of this issue.

³⁷ Author note: some references to Davidson are formatted (1963/2001). This indicates the initial date of publication of the paper (in this case 1963) but references the paper as it appears in the 2001 collection of his essays, with the page numbers relating to that volume.

- Clarke, R 2014 *Omissions: Agency, metaphysics, and responsibility*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davidson, D 1963 Actions, reasons, and causes. *Journal of Philosophy*, 60(23): 685–700. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2023177>. Reprinted in Davidson 2001 pp. 3–20.
- Davidson, D 2001 *Essays on actions and events*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Holland, P W 1986 Statistics and causal inference. *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 81(396): 945–960. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2289064>
- Hyman, J 2015 *Action, knowledge, and will*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jackson, F 1995 Essentialism, mental properties and causation. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 95: 253–268. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/aristotelian/95.1.253>
- Lowe, E J 2005 *The four-category ontology: A metaphysical foundation for natural science*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- McKittrick, J 2005 Are dispositions causally relevant? *Synthese*, 144(3): 357–371. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-005-5868-z>
- Melden, A I 1961 *Free action: Studies in philosophical psychology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Mele, A R 2005 Action. In: Jackson, F and Smith, M *The Oxford handbook of contemporary philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 78–88.
- Mourelatos, A 1978 Events, processes and states. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 2(3): 415–434. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00149015>
- Mulligan, K, Simons, P and Smith, B 1984 Truth-makers. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 44(3): 287–321. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2107686>
- Mumford, S 2004 *Laws in nature*. London: Routledge.
- Prior, E, Pargetter, R and Jackson, F 1982 Three theses about dispositions. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 19(3): 251–257.
- Shoemaker, S 1980 Causality and properties. In: van Inwagen, P *Time and cause*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel. pp. 109–135.
- Skow, B 2013 Are there non-causal explanations (of particular events)? *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 65(3): 445–457. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjps/axs047>
- Steward, H 1997 *The ontology of mind: Events, processes and states*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Strawson, P F 1985 Causation and explanation. In Bruce Vermazen, B and Hintikka, M B *Essays on Davidson: Actions and Events*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 115–135.
- Whittle, A 2008 A functionalist theory of properties. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 77(1): 59–82. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2008.00176.x>
- Woodward, J 2003 *Making things happen: A theory of causal explanation*. New York: Oxford University Press.