

# Two Varieties of Causal Anti-Realism

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# Aims

- What are the minimal commitments of the agency theory?
- Are these commitments realist or anti-realist?

# Lessons

- Resistance to the theory has been a result of misunderstanding the sense in which the minimal form of the theory is agent-dependent.
- Traditional ways of framing the issue between realism and anti-realism do not provide useful frameworks for thinking about the theory.

# Outline

- 1 The Minimal Agency Theory
  - The Traditional Theory and Its Objections
  - Menzies and Price
  - Woodward
  - The Minimal Agency Theory
- 2 Realism or Anti-Realism?
  - A Complication
  - A Poor Analogy
  - Characterising Contingency
  - Realism or Anti-Realism?

## Traditionally Reductive, Tied to Human Agency

- Collingwood, Gasking, von Wright, Menzies and Price, Price. One formulation:
  - “an event  $A$  is a cause of a distinct event  $B$  just in case bringing about the occurrence of  $A$  would be an effective means by which a free agent could bring about the occurrence of  $B$ ”.
- First analyse bringing about non-causally.
- Next analyse causation in terms of bringing about.

## Traditional Objections

**Confusion** Confuses the epistemology of causation (experimentation) with the metaphysics of causation (which has nothing to do with experimentation).

**Circularity** Is circular, since “bringing about” is itself a causal notion.

**Scope** Cannot handle causal relations between events outside the scope of agent control.

**Anthropocentrism** Is unacceptably anthropocentric, in taking contingent human capacities to be central to the analysis of a perfectly objective relation.

## Echoes from the Realism Debate

**Confusion** Standard realist complaints against idealism, phenomenalism, and verificationism.

**Circularity** Charge made against response-dependent theories of *e.g.* colour, aesthetics, and value.

**Scope** Realist complaints against the semantic anti-realism of Michael Dummett and others.

**Anthropocentrism** Standard realist complaints against conceptual relativity.

## An Analogy: Causation as a Secondary Quality

### A Naïve Dispositional Theory of Colour

An object is colour  $X$  if it looks  $X$  under normal conditions to normal observers.



## Replies (I): Confusion

One way of formulating **confusion**: the theory cannot make sense of there being good evidence for some claim which is in fact false.

- Naïve dispositionalism does imply that colour experiences are in general the best guide to colours.
- But it does not imply they are infallible.
- Or that colour claims can be translated into their verification conditions.
- Analogously for the agency theory.

## Replies (II): Circularity

- Can acquire the concepts on the right hand side of the analyses (“looks X”, “brings about”) *ostensively*, prior to learning any of the concepts on the left hand side of the analyses (“is colour X”, “causes”).

## Replies (III): Scope

Weakening the naïve dispositional theory of colour:

“an object has a certain colour not only if it possesses intrinsic properties which make true the appropriate counterfactual [e.g. “would look red in normal conditions”] but also if it possesses intrinsic properties which are identical with or closely similar to those of an object of which the appropriate counterfactual is true”.

Weakening the agency theory analogously:

*A* causes *B* if *A* can be used to bring about *B*, or if *A* and *B* possess intrinsic properties which are identical with or closely similar to those of *C* which can be used to bring about *D*.

## Replies (IV): Anthropocentrism

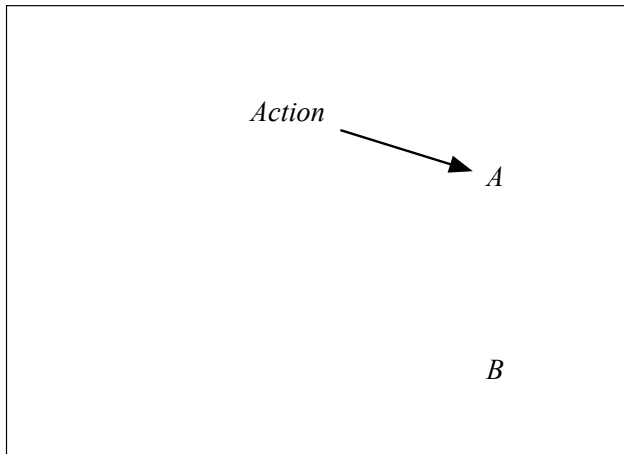
**Scope** Include both actual and *relevantly similar* cases.

**Anthropocentrism** The events in the domain of relevant similarity will be identical no matter how the scope of actual control is varied.

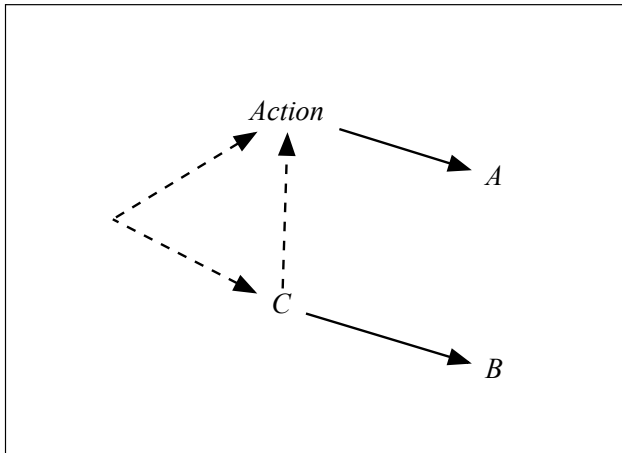
## More Objections (I): Circularity

- Implausible empiricism about causal learning.
- The persistence of a correlation between  $A$  and  $B$  when  $A$  is brought about by an agent is not sufficient for  $A$  to be a cause of  $B$ .

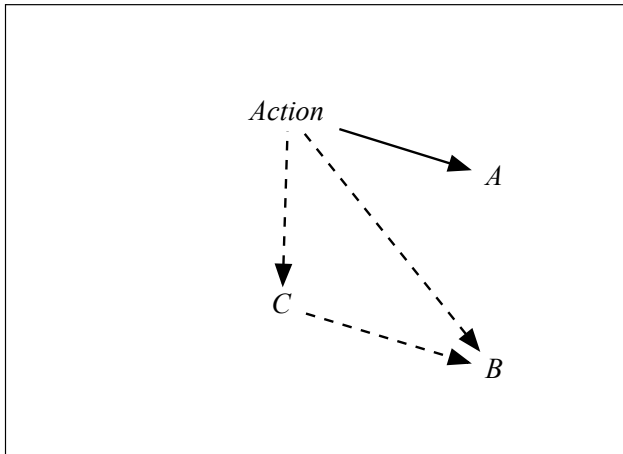
## More Objections (I): Circularity



## More Objections (I): Circularity



## More Objections (I): Circularity





## More Objections (I): Circularity

The lessons Woodward draws:

- Reductionism is false, since the conditions under which agency establishes causal relationships must be specified causally.
- Reference to human agency is not required, since those conditions do not make reference to it.

## More Objections (II): Scope and Anthropocentrism

**Scope** Either there is a characterisation of the similarity relation in terms of non-causal properties, in which case we have an agent-independent metaphysical reduction of causation to those properties, or there is only a causal characterisation of the similarity relation, in which case we have abandoned the prospect of reduction.

**Anthropocentrism** Stands or falls with **Scope**.

# Interventionism

- Non-reductive.
- Start with a causal notion of manipulation and show how other causal concepts can be recovered.
- Strengthened replies to all the objections:
  - Circularity** Non-viciously non-reductive.
  - Confusion** Human action a subset of the class of interventions.
  - Scope** Relevant similarity characterised causally.
  - Anthropocentrism** No longer a threat.

## Is Interventionism a Form of Causal Realism?

- Nonanthropomorphism claimed by fiat—non-reductive, so *a fortiori* it does not reduce to anything anthropocentric.
- Realism resting on our supposed pre-theoretical confidence in causal realism.
- Characterisation of traditional agency theories as involving two components:
  - An objective component consisting of regularities.
  - A subjective component consisting of psychological attitudes.
- Subjectivism refuted by being hit by a bus.
- Objectivism bolstered by the fact that we *discover* causal relations.

## Two varieties of agent dependence

- Anti-realism conflated with subjectivism.
- Ignores agent dependence grounded not in mental states, but in manipulative abilities.
- Agents are only interested in counterfactuals reflecting their manipulative capabilities.
- These reflect the physical structure of both agent and world, and are:
  - Dependent on the agent against which they are relativised.
  - But mind independent.
- Two varieties of agent dependence:
  - Mind dependence.
  - Ability dependence.
- Interventionism entails **ability dependence**.

## Scope Revisited

Woodward's solution to **scope**: Require merely that interventions be logically possible, with some means of evaluating the relevant counterfactuals. But this is insufficient to recover our actual causal claims:

- Cleanest logically possible intervention is a miracle.
- Best means of evaluating the counterfactuals is the fundamental laws.
- Not enough to recover the temporal asymmetry of causation.

*Note:* This argument doesn't depend on time-symmetrical laws, but merely laws which support both past and future-oriented counterfactuals.

# The Minimal Agency Theory

**Question** Why not counterfactual\*?

**Answer** Because we can't bring about their antecedents.

**Lesson** Interventionism entails **ability dependence**.

## The Minimal Agency Theory of Causation

The best explanation of causal facts makes reference to agents.

*Note:* Doesn't entail reductionism, empiricism, mind dependence, or creation rather than discovery; could be falsified (by a suitable reduction).

## A Complication to Set Aside

Global anti-realism about modality. In which case causation would be **mind dependent** as well as **ability dependent**. My question—is **ability dependence** a form of anti-realism.



## Secondary Qualities: A Poor Analogy

One point of analogy:

- The best explanation of colour facts makes reference to agents.

Three points of disanalogy:

- The agent facts involved are *passive* rather than *active*.
- The agent facts involved are *mental*, and in particular facts about *experience*.
- The agent facts involved are more highly contingent.

All of which encourages the conflation of the agency theory with subjectivism about causation.

## Using Interventionism To Characterise Contingency

Suppose the following is also true for aesthetics, value and colour:

### The Minimal Agent-Dependent Theory of $X$

The best explanation of  $X$  facts makes reference to agents.

What must I manipulate about you to change the  $X$  facts?

**Aesthetics and Value** Non-invasively inform or reason with you.

**Colour** Invasively manipulate your visual system.

**Causation** Invasively manipulate fundamental physical facts.

## Realism or Anti-Realism?

- Realism is traditionally characterised as truth-aptness plus independence from meaning-involving properties of agents (mental states, epistemic states, meanings, linguistic conventions, ...).
- On each of these the minimal agency theory is realist.
- So they miss the contrast between agency and non-agency theories of causation.
- But whether we say the minimal agency theory is a form of unproblematic anti-realism typically left off the map, or whether it is a form of realism, is inconsequential. The important point is that the minimal agency theory does not entail the mind dependence it is often thought to.

## Summary

- A proposal for the minimal commitments of the agency theory.
- Resistance to the theory has been a result of misunderstanding the sense in which the minimal form of the theory is agent-dependent.
- The traditional ways of framing the issue between realism and anti-realism do not provide useful frameworks for thinking about the theory.