

Two types of causal statements

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Max Kistler
Université Paris X – Nanterre
Institut Jean Nicod (CNRS)

The philosophical debate about the nature of causation seems to have reached a dead end: each of several incompatible theories is defeated by counterexamples, while it overcomes problems that its competitors cannot solve.

The aim of this metaphysical debate is twofold: a satisfactory account of causation should account for commonsense intuitions, as expressed in ordinary and scientific causal statements. But it must also provide a coherent picture of what makes those statements true. The price of coherence may be to judge literally false some intuitively correct causal statements.

I suggest that the existence of equally plausible but incompatible theories of causation has its source in the conflict between two types of intuitions. Some causal judgments are justified by the intuition of nomic dependency, i.e. dependency of one state of affairs on another by virtue of laws of nature. Other causal judgments are made on the basis of a material influence or transmission between events. These two types of intuition lie behind the tension between an explanatory concept and a mechanistic conception of causation.

In this talk, I show first that causal statements relating facts express the explanatory aspect of causation, and causal statements relating events express the mechanistic aspect. Second, I propose a framework that reconciles the two aspects and shows the logical relations between statements of the two sorts. Third, I analyze some types of causal statements that do not seem to fit in the proposed scheme: statements expressing interruption, triggering and omission.