

A Glimpse of the Secret Connexion: Harmonising Mechanisms with Counterfactuals

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Abstract

Among the current philosophical attempts to understand causation two seem to be the most prominent. The first is James Woodward's counterfactual approach; the second is the mechanistic approach advocated by Peter Machamer, Lindley Darden, Carl Craver, Jim Bogen and Stuart Glennan. The counterfactual approach takes it that causes make a difference to their effects, where this difference-making is cashed out in terms of actual and counterfactual interventions. The mechanistic approach takes it that two events are causally related if and only if there is a mechanism that connects them. On the face of it, the two approaches need not be in conflict. The mechanisms might satisfy (or depend on) certain interventionist counterfactuals and, conversely, the interventionist counterfactuals might be made true by the presence of certain mechanisms. But, overall, both approaches tend to be imperialistic. Advocates of each argue that their own approach fares much better than their opponents'. The question then is this: are we forced to choose between the mechanistic approach and the counterfactual one? In this paper, I argue that, as they stand, both approaches face some important problems that need to be fixed. I shall also argue that there is a sense in which the counterfactual approach is more basic than the mechanistic, though the former will benefit from a better understanding of the mechanisms that are at work in causal connections. So both approaches can work together to offer a better understanding of causation. If they work in tandem, they can offer us a glimpse of what Hume famously called "the secret connexion". But in so far as the 'secret connexion' is an intrinsic relation between the causal relata, neither of the above approaches tells us what this relation is.

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