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A PHILOSOPHIC INQUIRY INTO CAUSATION COMPARING DIVERSE
METAPHYSICAL SYSTEMS

by

Jane Fisher

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Western Michigan University, 1996

Causation is a problem for philosophers because in explaining causation one must explain reality itself. Since the metaphysical systems of history are carefully reasoned claims concerning reality, they will be employed in this discussion of causation. We will examine the foundational posits of four metaphysical positions -- Buddhism, Platonism, Nominalism, and Realism -- and review the meaning each assigns for causation. We can then observe how the meaning of causation is altered depending on the system of metaphysics that serves as its context.

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Jane Fisher

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

The history of philosophy offers many and diverse explanations of reality. Those that receive extensive development become metaphysical systems and have the ambition of accounting for ultimate reality. Each of them, at some point, must address the issue of causation. This paper asks the question, does one's view of causation change depending on what one takes reality to be? I will argue that, in comparing discussions of causation, the meaning of causation does in fact change. Rather than remaining a constant, the meaning of causation shifts significantly when there are significant shifts in what is taken to be real. I also show that this is due in part to how a given philosophy addresses issues of duration, individuation, and the related problem of generality. In my concluding thoughts I suggest that perhaps a unification amongst metaphysical systems on the problem of causation would occur if more could be said about the "non related connection" between moments in time and between generality and particularity.

General Introduction to the Problem of Causation

Consider with me the following scene: you are at breakfast and in good health, reaching across the table for the pepper. As you bring it to your plate, the cap of the pepper shaker falls off into your eggs. A cloud of pepper dust rises, and you next find yourself sneezing. Now ask yourself

this seemingly trivial question: was there a reason why you sneezed? A sensible answer would be, "Yes, it was the pepper that caused me to sneeze." Most of us would consider this obvious. Sneezing is not a random chance event. You sneeze because you are caused to sneeze. In our example, the fork near the plate or the chair you were sitting in certainly did not cause you to sneeze. The culprit was the pepper.

Now suppose you are a biochemist having breakfast, reaching for the same faulty pepper shaker. The cap flies off, burying your eggs in pepper and behold, you sneeze. It may take a bit of research into scientific journals, but when asked if your sneeze was something other than random chance, you would say "of course!" and, in the effort to give a complete account, you might proceed to go into detail about the chemical composition of pepper and its effect on nasal membranes and the reflex action of pulmonary muscles that react to expel the irritant by sneezing. This would also be a sensible answer. Notice that it is a bit more involved than saying the cause was the pepper.

At last, suppose you are a philosopher sitting down to breakfast reaching for the shaker labeled "P." The cap discharges into the air, and your eggs lay entombed. From the mound a mist of dust rises, entering your nasal passages, and, in spite of holding your finger under your nose, you sneeze. Now, as a philosopher, consider why you sneezed.

The outcome of this third scenario, I'm afraid, is harder to predict. There isn't one standard approach. There are any number of directions to go in with this simple little question, and they all only lead to bigger questions. Some directions lead to strange notions. One train of

philosophic inquiry concludes that the fork had just as much to do with the sneezing as the pepper. Another questions whether your body is really there, sneezing or not. One says that the cause of the sneeze lies in whatever we agree upon, not in the pepper in your nose. Yet another states that the real cause of your sneezing is that all the other things that could have happened, failed to, so you sneezed.

These notions may seem far-fetched for a mere sneeze. However, the difficulty splintering our analysis into so many possible directions is not sneezing, it is causation. Explaining the inner workings of cause and effect is problematic for philosophers. Since it may not be obvious at first why this is an issue, we need to first make a general inquiry into what it is that makes causation a difficult subject.

Causation is an essential component of our notion about the world. When an event happens, we are inclined to think that explainable factors gave rise to the occasion. Something caused the book to fall off the shelf; it didn't just cascade to the floor for no reason at all. It is difficult to imagine a world where things happen without cause. A concept so basic to our understanding must have something quite solid to it if we bring it under analysis. Or does it? Let us return to our example in the kitchen and see if we can reveal from it why causation is hard to account for. The scene is before us as above. A sneeze has occurred. Locate the cause.

We will start with the common sense notion. Is the cause the pepper? Only in the most cursory sense. Upon deeper consideration, to say, "the cause is the pepper" could not in itself account for the sneezing. Pepper doesn't itself sneeze, there needs to also be a sneezer. There must

be present something that is sneeze-prone. The eggs weren't sneezing after all, and they were coated in the sneeze-producing compound.

Is the cause both in the pepper and in the person? This would seem closer to the truth. Given what science tells us about the chemistry of pepper and how it reacts with human membranes, both the pepper and the person need to be present for a sneeze to occur. Of interest here is that in our effort to single out the cause, we have found it to exist in more than one place. The cause is in the pepper dust and in the tendencies of a person's nasal membranes.

Unfortunately, once we are on to this line of thinking, the factors multiply. Mention must be made of the neurons and brain cells involved that send impulses, and the pulmonary muscles that contract and release so violently in a sneeze. But why stop here? What about the loose cap? If it had been tight, the pepper wouldn't have spilled. Perhaps the angle of the chair you were sitting in prevented you from easily noticing that the cap was loose. And further, how could there be a sneeze without there being air to force through the nose at high velocities? Besides the air that you breathe and the earth underneath, you would also have to include in your account those responsible for begetting you (how could you sneeze if you were never born?), the food that sustained you, and the farmers and equipment that grew the food. In the end, the list of causal factors may well include all states of affairs as they are and have been, including the placement of the fork on the table.

At this point, one might call in a selection technique to help get to the essence of a causal event. If all the other conditions at the breakfast

table remained the same except for the accident with the pepper shaker, would there have been a sneeze? Probably not, so the presence of pepper dust in the air must be the deciding factor in turning normal respiration into a violent exhalation.

Yet by this method, have we succeeded in giving a full account of the sneeze? Lurking behind its simplicity is the same web of nearly infinite complexity that we have already seen, because pepper alone does not cause a sneeze. Instead we have a notion of what seems to be the essential component, the leading role if you will. Yet what if there were no air in the room, would there have been a sneeze? Other components in the situation are also essential.

The trouble seems to lie in the attempt to locate one particular thing and call it the cause for an event. Isn't causation rather a certain arrangement of things that perform in a certain sequence of happenings? Instead of one thing to call the cause we have an arrangement or pattern, such as pepper dust in contact with nasal membranes is followed by sneezing. This inevitably leads to a difficult question. Metaphysically speaking, what is an "arrangement?" What is "when-you-inhale-pepper-you-sneeze" in itself? Is it anything real at all? If it isn't real, then what are we referring to when we determine one as cause? There is no trouble in seeing that individual things in a causal pattern are real. In the world there exist eggs and pepper shakers and people who sneeze. Is there also in the world "arrangements" or "patterns" that exist in themselves?

To take a different tack in accounting for causation, could it be considered merely as a factor in mental processes -- something our mind

selectively envisions to satisfy a certain purpose? This would explain why the appropriate answer to "why did I sneeze?" differs according to the differing intentions it was put toward. A scientist would expect a scientific answer. A spouse walking into the kitchen would be content with the lid-fell-off-the-shaker explanation. The above multitudinous complexity and metaphysical quandary arose out of trying to locate the one existing mechanism that can answer all questions about what caused the sneeze. In this approach, to find a cause is to satisfy a designated purpose. Explanation y will do x work for me in a statement. Find the variables that apply.

Can such an approach offer a full account of what causation actually is? Consider this example: A tree falls in the middle of a wood. Is there a cause for its fall if no one ever wonders about it? The answer would have to be "no." In our attempt to out-manuever disturbing questions by relegating causation to human purposes we have run straight into others. We have made causation into a mental state, like the sound of a falling tree that requires a perceiver before it can be anything other than disturbed air waves. The fact that the tree was dead and rotting didn't cause it to fall in this view. Those were just facts among many countless others such as the sun's shining, and the earth's rotating. It requires someone taking an interest in the situation to turn the mere fact of the tree's condition into the cause of the fall.

From this approach, if there is no framework of inquiry to satisfy, there is no causation; there are only sequences of events. Even with such a framework, the cause can vary, relative to the kind of answer that is

being sought. Therefore, the real cause of your sneeze lies in anyone's purpose for asking about it instead of there being pepper up your nose.

This peculiar notion arose out of making causation into a mental function instead of a factor that exists independently from whatever anyone may be thinking. We could instead say that causation is apprehended by the mind instead of manufactured. The real cause for an event is out there and I can come to know it in my mind. Unfortunately, by philosophic standards, such a stand is only gratuitous unless the one asserting it is prepared to give the metaphysics of such an epistemology. By what means can we have such direct knowledge of reality? Metaphysically, what is our mind sharing in with the world? Now our trouble is double. We must not only explain what causation is but also the means by which we come to know it.

Having these directions of fairly normal inquiry each lead into tangles should be enough to establish that explaining causation is tricky. The definitive explanation for causation does not appear to be self-evident. If we define causation as the situation such that something has the power to produce an effect in another thing, we find the notion not so clear under analysis. The "causal power" exists simultaneously in many places. Instead of a simple mechanistic and singular factor, there is a seemingly endless web of relevant factors that produce the effect in question. If we define causation as a "pattern" of events, it isn't apparent what a pattern is in itself. If we define causation strictly as a mental construct that satisfies human purposes, this explains the relativism in our answers to causal questions, but we have lost connection with the

causation of events, happening as they happen, no matter what our notions may be. If we consider causation to be both in the world and knowable to a mind, there remains the problem of explaining how the phenomenon of knowledge takes place. Thus, it should now be clear that pinning down causation is tricky because what comes along with explaining causation is the monumental task of explaining reality itself.

One might wonder who could possibly be up to such a task. Who could explain reality? Science has enjoyed plenty of success without having to have settled these philosophic angles on causation. The biochemical approach to a sneeze was pretty thorough in our example; what more is really necessary?

We may not need to understand reality to the extent that would satisfy a philosopher. Afterall, philosophic thought isn't necessary for daily functioning; it is more often a detriment to getting things accomplished. Even so, reflection on topics such as causation does have the value of deepening the angle of insight that a person or a culture takes toward reality. Philosophers point out that even the normal thinking and reasoning we use in daily functioning has some kind of foundation. In order to reason, you must have something to reason from. Quite often a person works from unconscious premises, or premises that are actually assumptions -- notions that are never really thought about and intentionally taken to be the foundation of further reasoning. Metaphysics can be seen as an investigation into the most foundational of all premises that our thinking reasons from. Or, it can also be an investigation into what has to be real in order for us to have a foundation

in reality for the assertions we do make. In the very least, as we shall see, studying metaphysical topics will expose gaps in our understanding that do not show up at the level of every day functioning.

Those individuals and cultures that have put an effort toward metaphysical issues have left behind a wealth of ideas and carefully reasoned claims about the nature of reality. We will examine the foundational posits of a selection of these metaphysical positions and review the meaning each assigns for causation.

DISCUSSION

The Role of Causation in Four Metaphysical Systems

Buddhism and Causation as Momentary Existence

To open, I have chosen two views that are considered extreme from our contemporary view of things, Buddhism and Platonism. The challenges posed by these great systems of thought will quickly get us past our assumptions and into some real thinking on the matter. We'll first start in the East with Buddhism. In this metaphysical system, there isn't anything that is real beyond the present moment. There is only now. This foundational posit underlies all else.¹ If you consider just the act of experiencing the world, there is something to this. My senses inform me only of what is happening right now, in this moment. I cannot see the past with my eyes; I can only remember it in my mind. Buddhism takes this truth as its foundation and holds all other notions against it to assess their truth or falsity.

Working within this system, that only what's now is real, what meaning could we ascribe to our topic, that events have a cause? There could not have been a particular cause from the past that has created an effect in the present because there is only the present. Are things not caused to happen if they are real only now?

Buddhism takes the stand that existence is pure causation; the two are synonymous.² Consider a mud puddle on a rainy day. I am looking at

one now and can see concentric circles rippling out from the spot where a raindrop hits the surface of the water. In order for this simple event to occur, many players must be present and each must have the right characteristics for their role. A raindrop hitting dry pavement would not cause a ripple, and a very cold day would prohibit both rain and ripples. The mere raindrop making an impact is not the producer of an effect in the surface tension of the water. All things such as they are in this moment have caused the rippled water. Causal "power" for Buddhism is the entire world, as it is, in this moment.

There is an alarming consequence lurking behind this seemingly simple notion. What is missing is our common sense idea that reality consists on individual things that interact with each other, causing certain effects. Buddhism dispenses with individually existing things.

...reality consists of bare point-instants, they have as yet no definite position in time, neither a definite position in space, nor have they any sensible qualities... A single moment is something unique, something containing no similarity with whatsoever other objects. It is therefore unrepresentable and unutterable. ³

It isn't too strange to say that true reality is actual only in the present. That the past is gone and the future not yet here is a common enough notion. It is very strange, however, to question if actual existence is really made up of individual things. This page right here, the person reading it, and all the other things existing in the world right now is what seems real to us. To Buddhists, that is your imagination getting carried away. "This-here-now" refers to all things at once, and it does so without duration. The

apparent existence of individuals and the interactions between them (so essential to our normal understanding of causation) is an illusion.

It is not ultimately true, for example, that a batter can hit a baseball into the air.⁴ The flight pattern of a Cecil Fielder home run is a product of the imagination according to Buddhism, no matter how many fans attest to its reality. The ball exists for only a moment and is then replaced by a completely new ball which also lasts for only a moment and so on. That we see it as the same ball in each instance requires the use of imagination. Our memory stores the impression of each moment as it happens. The mind connects the impressions together and plays them in sequence for the mind's eye, creating the illusion of a ball being hit by the bat of an all-star and sailing out of the stadium.

Consider how this is like a motion picture.⁵ When the still pictures of the individual frames on the reel of film are sequentially projected on a screen, they create an illusion of action. In this analogy, Buddhism wants to say that only the current individual "frame" is real. It exists for a moment and is replaced by another frame. The string of frames played together as a "movie" cannot be real. It is an illusion spun by the imagination. There exists no cosmic film reel and projector. There is only the individual "takes" that go out of existence almost as they come into existence.

Thus, the attempt to track down the reason for your sneeze at breakfast is to get caught in the web of illusions. You can't even say that you sneezed. There is no "you" to be doing any sneezing. True reality doesn't last long enough for there to be personal identity. The same goes

for any other subject or object. Consequently, there is no "pepper" that "has" the "power" to "irritate" "your" "nasal corridors," no "brain" "sending" "signals" to "pulmonary muscles" to "contract." There aren't any subjects and there isn't any action either. All this involves sustaining a notion in your imagination beyond the time that an instant is real.

It may seem that Buddhism is claiming that nothing is real. What the philosophy is disclaiming is the reality of individually existing things. Reality to a Buddhist is vast. It is everything at once in this moment. If you could break the mind's illusion you would know that reality is not a divided collection of individually existing things. Vast reality is in the smallest seeming event, such as a sneeze in the kitchen.

In stepping into a Buddhist view of the world, we are led to ponder issues concerning time and the existence of individual things. Both are central to the issue of causation. We will discuss the problem of individuation in the next section on Platonism. Here we will concentrate on the role time plays in causation.

Commonly, when we think of causation, we think of it in terms of a sequence in time. First there is the cause, then, the effect. "Effect" follows "cause" in succession. There are those, however, that argue that this is not the case.⁶ The change occurring in a causal event happens all at once, not in a sequence of events. Cause and effect are simultaneous in this view. The rock that is warmed by the sun's rays doesn't go through a stage of "becoming warm" by the sun.⁷ There is no intermediate phase in earlier moments of "becoming" when the rock isn't yet fully effected by the cause. As long as the rays remain in contact, the rock will continue to

have a higher temperature than it does when it is in shadow. The change in temperature is simultaneous with the cause, it is not an "after" effect.⁸

So why does causation imply to us a sequence, or chain of events? When we reflect back on events to understand the changes that have occurred, we do not see the simultaneity of cause and effect perhaps because we do not perceive "in the moment." We perceive events over time, over several moments. Over time, the rock went from being cold to being warm. We look back after the change has occurred and piece together our understanding of what happened. From the data of multiple moments taken together, as in a movie, we separate cause from effect. The rock began in shadow with the sun's rays shining elsewhere. Then, the rays hit its surface and produced a warm rock. We reflect back and see the source of the cause existing prior to the effect, and it takes on a primacy in our understanding. First source-of-the-cause (warm sun, cold rock), then comes the caused effect (warm rock). This is a construction based on hindsight. Looking back, we tied together the sequence of affairs that happened and pieced together the story.

Looking in the very moment that an instance of causation takes place (if such a thing is even truly possible) would not be so prosaic. From this view it is hard to attach meaning to our normal story-line notion of causation. There is no developing plot building from the past and reaching into the future. The moments aren't tied together in a tightly knit story like they are when you look back in hindsight. Looking toward the future from "in-the-moment," we see that many things are possible for the next moment. We don't know absolutely which option will take

place. Sometimes what happens next is a surprise. A leaf could have blown over the rock, keeping it in shadow.

Considered as the moments happen (as opposed to the hindsight perspective), what really carries one moment over to the next? We cannot say that the momentum of causation binds the moments because in this view, causation happens only in the moment and would not be able to "reach over" to the next moment to produce its effect. Metaphysically speaking, we are looking for some identifiable connection between the moments that exists as each happen, or perhaps even before they get here. Isn't there more that relates the moments than the sequence the events fell into that we see when we look back?

Platonism and Causation as Eternal Form

In Buddhism, the moments are not related to one another. Notions of causal sequences are just the mind making movies out of the impressions it receives. To get closest to true reality, one has to empty the mind and live in the moment. Next we will consider how the explanation for causation changes if we allow reality to endure beyond the moment. We will go to the opposite extreme of Buddhism with the metaphysical system called Platonism.

To appreciate this position, first focus on how anything beyond the present moment could be real. We rely heavily on sense perception to inform us about reality. As the Buddhists brought out, all that our senses can give us is impressions of the present moment which we "hold" in our memory. Most would like to believe that there is something more

substantial than memory and imagination giving reality duration, but what is it? For example, if I simply claim that the cup now in front of me is the same cup that was in the cupboard yesterday, what is the proof besides the memory of seeing it there in my mind? I cannot play back yesterday to corroborate my mind's testimony when it plays back its memory of yesterday. Only the present moment is vivid and real. What is my proof that it is still the same cup?

For a Platonist, the reason I can sustain a notion of the same cup from moment to moment is because there is something essential about it that really is still there; in fact, it is eternal. It is not affected by the passage of time at all. The item in the cupboard yesterday is the same item before me today because it ultimately participates in what a Platonist would call a "form" -- in this case, "cup." "Cup" as an absolute never goes in or out of being. It always is and always will be. "Absolute cupness" is the cause of the "cupness" in this object. Plato, the main inspiration of Platonists, explains this view of causation through the figures of Socrates and Cebes in the following dialogue regarding beauty:

... It seems to me that whatever else is beautiful apart from absolute beauty is beautiful because it partakes of that absolute beauty, and for no other reason. Do you accept this kind of causality?

Yes, I do

Well, now, that is as far as my mind goes; I cannot understand these other ingenious theories of causation. If someone tells me that the reason why a given object is beautiful is that it had a gorgeous color or shape or any other such attribute, I disregard all these other explanations -- I find them all confusing -- and I cling simply and straightforwardly and no doubt foolishly to the explanation that the one thing

that makes that object beautiful is the presence in it or association with it, in whatever way the relation comes about, of absolute beauty. I do not go so far to insist upon the precise details -- only upon the fact that it is by beauty that beautiful things are beautiful.⁹

For as long as this mass of ceramic participates in "cupness," the cup will endure through many "point-instants." This gives me the foundation for saying that it's still the same cup today as it was yesterday. Metaphysically, there is more than my memory to back up the claim.

Platonic forms seem to give items such as cups duration and even seem to give an explanation of their existence. The eternal forms stand behind all our experiences. There are strange consequences, however, to this view. Consider two cups. On what basis are they two separate things? How is it that I can so easily tell them apart? Are there two "cupnesses" or is there an individual and eternal "cup" for each?

This issue has been called "the problem of individuation" by philosophers. Our common view of the world is that it is made of individually existing things. This is certainly our view of causation - individual things interact in causal relations. Yet, explaining the sense in which things are truly individual is difficult. It is a metaphysical issue through and through. Some metaphysical systems reach the point where they cannot lend much credulity to individuals.

To answer our query about the two cups in terms of Platonism, there is only one "cup". Platonism does not allow individually existing things to be fully real. They may seem to be real, but it is an illusion. The manifest world of separately existing things that are coming into being and passing away is not real. What is ultimately real in Platonism are the

forms. The advancing and receding, so to speak, of eternal forms can "appear" many times over to create the illusion of all things.

In this system, where causation is participation in eternal form, cases of causal interaction are not truly interactions. What the forms cause is the illusion of our world. Our common sense notion of causation, that individuals interact and cause effects is part of this illusion. It is an inaccurate perception of pure eternal form. If I were to smash the cup with a hammer, the form for cup would recede to be replaced by the form for broken pieces.¹⁰ The eternal forms themselves experience no change. Though my experience would seem to be an observation of the effects of my hammer's blow on this fragile ceramic, in true reality, this would not be an interaction between an individual hammer and an individual cup. If we could perceive what is ultimately real, there wouldn't be this "virtual reality" of individual events and interaction. There would only be the forms themselves.

The Platonic version of the kitchen scenario is that the whole event as we experienced it wasn't quite real. Behind the seemingly personal scene in a seemingly multitudinous world are singular eternal entities, lending their singular eternal essence to our limited notions about what is really going on. "Table," "chair," "person," "egg," and "pepper" have lent their essence to cause the impression of our having breakfast that morning.

In both metaphysical systems we have discussed thus far, our experience of the world as individually existing things interacting in causal relations has been discounted. In Buddhism, the only individuals

are the point-instants of entire reality. In Platonism, the only true individuals are the eternal forms. The notion that the things of our familiar world exist as individuals is so basic to common sense that it is difficult to see why they must be disclaimed at the metaphysical level. Think of the sneeze, for example. Is it really necessary to call in the entire universe (as in Buddhism) to cause a sneeze, or, (as in Platonism) is it necessary for there to be an eternal form for all sneezes? It seems strange to think that in ultimate reality there is a form that is eternally sneezing.

The problem of individuation is as old as the history of philosophy itself. In the past, philosophers have proposed some sort of form or essence to account for the creation and the duration of an individual through time. Aristotle's conception of an individual was that it was a substance made up of both form and matter. The material components of a substance may come and go, but the form, or essence, endures through the changes. Also of concern is the discussion of differences among similar individuals. As in our example, are the cups entirely distinct, or are they two instances of the same thing, a cup?

Questions such as how this cup is truly independent from all other cups have been hotly debated. It is a discussion of the common natures of things versus their individuality. At issue in the Middle Ages was whether the individual nature of a thing contributes to its common nature.¹¹ Does the individuality of this cup contribute to the common nature of all cups? Or, more personally, do I, as an individual contribute anything to the common nature of what it is to be a human being?

During the Existential movement, preset common natures in human beings were flatly denied. Sartre claimed that it was entirely up to the individual to create his or her own nature. Individual essences, created by the individual, are all there is to human nature. Such monumental freedom and at the same time responsibility is what accounts for our feelings of despair.¹² This contrasts sharply with what we have seen under Platonism. My individuality is not real. Only my common nature as a human being is fully real.

We will now turn to philosophies that attempt to allow individually existing things to be ultimately real, in the hopes of finding an explanation for how, philosophically speaking, a particular person can be caused to sneeze. Up to now it has been an illusion.

Nominalism and Causation as Entirely Unique Events

Let's look again at the scene in the kitchen, this time with the view that an event is taking place between individuals. A cloud of pepper dust rises, interacts with the membranes in your nose, messages fire in the brain, and your muscles contract into a sneeze. The interaction is between uniquely existing things. There is only one nose, one nervous system and one set of muscles that is yours in the world. Many other clouds of pepper dust may resemble the one that was before you at breakfast, but there is only one cloud of pepper dust that is that cloud of pepper dust. Let us call such uniquely existing entities "particulars."

Now we could say that what exist in the world are particulars and only particulars. Each individual event and thing is a unique occurrence.

Philosophers holding a version of this position call themselves Nominalists. Nominalists claim that everything about each individual is ultimately unique. Individuality and uniqueness become the same thing. The virtue of such an extreme position is that it seems to do away with the problem of individuation. The way in which a thing has commonalities with others and yet is unique is not an issue because things are only unique. Strictly speaking, there are no commonalities with other things.¹³ It is meant to be a down-to-earth position. Anything that is real cannot be in two places at once. There is only one cup that is this cup. It cannot be both here and there at the same time.

The name for this position comes from its epistemological stand. In building our knowledge of the world, from early childhood on, we come to know things as falling under categories that someone has given a name to. In this sense, we really don't regard what we experience as absolutely unique. We know things by their category. These generalizations make up our knowledge and language. Since in this system, the only true metaphysical entities are particulars, the categories we use aren't real in themselves. They are merely the names we use to refer to groups of uniquely existing things. Hence Nominalism is the position that the names of things aren't real in themselves. Making generalizations about a group of similar objects is merely a means of categorizing things that are ultimately quite unique.

There is a problem with calling generalizations merely names. It puts our knowledge and language on a shaky foundation. For example, how do you know that pepper is coming toward you? At some

developmental stage of your life you learned the general concept of "pepper" and you are now applying it to this particular cloud of molecules. Yet each individual is necessarily different from any other individual in this system. There can be no general categories such as "pepper." These generalizations may be short cuts that we use to organize our experience (all pepper-like things we'll call pepper, for example), but true reality is never general under this system. What, then, is coming toward you if it really isn't pepper? We cannot assume to know. It is difficult to see how any knowledge about the world can be built when every piece of it is strictly unique. What we are experiencing in the present can have no connection to seemingly similar experiences in the past.

Some philosophers avoid a metaphysical commitment to generalities by making a case for resemblance. They say that a resemblance (similarity) between things is all we need in order to meaningfully group things under a category and give the category a name. It is only important that this dust cloud of pepper resembles all the other molecular groupings that we call pepper. Each instance is still unique and particular. On the basis of these approximate groupings we can form knowledge.

The difficulty with this view is what then do we make of "resemblance?" How can it fit into a metaphysical system where only particulars are real? It is itself a generalization. "A resemblance" is something that all members of the group share.¹⁴

In daily life, generalizations such as "pepper" are invaluable. It is even more valuable to make complexes of generalizations such as "pepper, when inhaled, makes you sneeze." We consider this to be

knowledge and we put it to use. When we don't want to sneeze, we avoid inhaling pepper. When we do want to sneeze, we put it in our snuff. Yet if every unit of reality is strictly unique, this can't be true knowledge, if being true is being real. Generalizations ranging over individuals aren't unique, thus, they aren't real. It only seems like knowledge.

This is especially pertinent to our topic. In common daily use, knowledge about causal relations is expressed in general terms. Water, when heated to 212°F, will boil. Not just some water, all water. However, in a Nominalistic system, causal sequences are always unique. The eighteenth century philosopher David Hume shook up the intellectual community by making a point that is related to the Nominalist's view. When it comes to generalizations about causal sequences, Hume said that these are our habits of expectation.¹⁵ We are in the habit of expecting things to behave as they have behaved in our past experiences of them, though there is no logical foundation for this. For example, we expect the sun to rise and set tomorrow as it has in all days past. This may be what we are used to, but there is no guarantee that the sun will rise tomorrow. It doesn't rise because it necessarily must rise; it just does, according to Hume.

Hume was making a point concerning logic and necessity that fits well with Nominalism. In the world are unique particulars. Any similarity and order that ranges over these particulars are merely human habits of expectation, and not anything metaphysically real. Today is unique. It is not metaphysically linked to yesterday or tomorrow. Similarities and generalizations have no metaphysical significance. Thus

causation is unique in every case. The generalizations we make about causal sequences and call knowledge are only habit and convention. They have no metaphysical tie to what is truly the case.

Speaking as a Nominalist, the two unique objects before me are, as far as my purposes go, quite similar. I'll call them both cups. What makes them similar to me are the conventions I've adopted in my life that put me in the habit of taking them to be instances of the same thing. Likewise, in terms of causation, if I hit one with a hammer, I will expect it to conform to one of those circumstances where a heavy object can smash a more fragile one. It would utterly amaze me if the hammer flew into pieces instead of the cup. If that were to happen, I'd have to rethink my notion. Not wanting to do unnecessary probing, I'll keep my habit of expectation until such a challenge occurs.

How far can you go lumping unique things under a category and taking them to be the same thing in order to go about your business? Quite far, says the Nominalist. That is what we cannot help but do, and it works quite well. When a category ceases to work, we make up a new one.

What has happened to the meaning of causation in this account? Causation at the metaphysical level is really unknowable. It is far too unique. We can categorize causal events, describing and generalizing them for our purposes, though we shouldn't take this activity to be any kind of metaphysical explanation of causation.

In speaking about the event in the kitchen, a Nominalist account might be: this cloud-like, pepper-like thing we will call "cloud of pepper" was taken in ("inhaled") by the human-like thing we call "person" and,

consequently, what we call a "sneeze" followed in the "person." Such a summation is (an awkward) linguistic description; it is not a metaphysical explanation of sneezing. Sneeze-like events just happen. The "sneeze" in the kitchen was unique, as all events are in this system. To link that event in a general way with all other "sneezes" that follow "inhalations" of "pepper" is something we do to make predictions about the future, but there is no metaphysical justification for it. It is just something that we find useful. If our predictions work out, it is luck.

In what we have seen so far, Nominalism has some similarity to Buddhism. A causal event is brute existence. It cannot be comprehended because it is utterly unique. The human mind strings events and notions together to formulate opinions and expectations about what happened and what may happen. Here we describe and categorize our perceptions of causal events, we do not metaphysically explain them. The metaphysical building blocks of the two are quite different, however. For Buddhism, there is one block at any one time, the uncarved point-instant. In Nominalism, we have a complex world of individual things, each distinctly unique, with no parts or aspects held in common. It is very far from Platonism; nothing faintly resembling a form is allowed.

Realism and Causation as Natural Law

Another metaphysical system says yes, particulars are ultimately real, but that is not all. There are also "universals." This position is historically called Realism, though other positions in philosophy go by the same name. For example, Realism also refers to positions claiming that

something in the world exists apart from any activity of the mind. In this paper, we will refer only to the metaphysical position about universals when we use the word "Realism."

Realist philosophers say that there is something metaphysical that this cloud of pepper dust shares with all other clouds of pepper dust. There truly is something in common: universal pepper. Universal pepper isn't a name we have given to all pepper-like things, it is a metaphysical entity. This may remind one of the Platonic form. Though Realism is more similar to Platonism than Nominalism is, it is still quite different because there is no transcendent, eternal realm. Individually existing things are what is real. Plato considered the eternal forms to be ultimately real, not the individually existing things. Realism claims that universals only exist in individuals.

To further our understanding of this position, let's focus our attention on a particular and the several universals somehow inhering in it. I'll place a bowl on the table before me and use it for our example. This bowl exists uniquely. There is no other individual that is strictly identical to it. There may be another bowl that was manufactured from the same mold and coated with the same batch of ceramic glaze, but it could never be the same bowl as this one. For one thing, it would have a different place in space and time (a different past and a different future). All of these notions address the particularity of the bowl.

Now notice that some of the properties of this bowl could be the same as the properties of another bowl. Let us say that they are the same shade of blue, for example. Taking this further, one of the bowl's

properties may even show up in a completely different kind of object. A hand towel may have the same blue in a stripe. As another example, take the bowl's ability to contain things. "Being a container" is a property. "Containership" is shared by bowls, cups, swimming pools, etc.

To go one step further, similar observations can be made regarding the bowl's relations to other things. The relation "being on top of a table" is the same relation any object on any table has throughout the world and throughout time.

For Realists, these generalizations ("blue," "container," "on top of a table") are metaphysically real. They aren't loosely observed "similarities" between particulars. They aren't merely names or phrases in a language. True reality is not only particular, it is also general. The properties and relations of particularly existing things are what is meant when a Realist speaks of universals. The uniquely existing thing that "has" the properties and relations is the particular, but its properties and relations exist all over at once (universally) as the blue color did in our example with the bowl. This arrangement makes it possible for our language (which is made up of generalizations) to say something that is more than a useful convention. In this system, a generalization we make about the world is true knowledge when it accurately represents the metaphysically real generalities present in actually existing particulars.

So what does causation look like in this system? The stage is set. We have a metaphysical system that considers individually existing things to be real. The generalizations we need for organizing experience and amassing knowledge have a metaphysical basis. Our foundational posits

are that in the world are particulars and universals, neither existing apart from the other. Now, how do these amalgamate individuals interact? How does one cause an effect in another?

According to the Realist philosopher, D. M. Armstrong:

There is some very close link between universals and causality. The link is of this nature. If a thing instantiates a certain universal, then, in virtue of that, it has the power to act in a certain way.¹⁶

The object depresses the scales in virtue of its mass; the fire makes the water boil in virtue of its temperature; and so on.¹⁷

Armstrong is saying that properties and relations are the active parties in any given situation, and if properties and relations are universals, then it is universals that have the leading role in causation. Let us compare a Nominalist's and a Realist's account of boiling water to amplify his point. For our example we will use five beakers of water over five flames. The temperature in each of the pots reaches 212°F, and they each boil. The Nominalist says that these are five unique instances. That the water boiled at the same temperature each time shows an amazing regularity, but the events are not metaphysically connected. We do, however, draw a connection in our minds. Observations of resemblance and regularity give humans the expectation that water boils at 212°F.

For the Realist, there are the unique instances as well as other metaphysical entities, the universal properties and relations. The metaphysical infrastructure is woven differently. One property can be shared by all five fires, such as its temperature. Likewise, the universal properties of water simultaneously run through each beaker of water. The

single relation "fire below a beaker of water" also runs through the five stations. Now in addition to all of this, five instances of the same event are caused to happen. The properties of the fires brought into relation with the properties of the water have produced an effect in the properties of the five beakers of water. Thus, the universal properties and relations in each station are causing each individual effect, and, taken as a whole, each individual causal sequence is an instance of a greater universal sequence.

So, not only can we select out of these individual circumstances the universal properties and relations that run through each of the five stations, we can select out the universals that run through any instance of boiling water. To put such an analysis in everyday language, we would say "water, when heated past 212°F, will boil." This is a universal situation and it is a causal relation. In common terms, we call it a law of a nature. The "higher-order" universals¹⁸ arch over and bind, so to speak, all situations where a fire heats water and it boils. There is something metaphysical at work. To Nominalists, nothing here is "at work" connecting separate situations together besides the habits of our expectations, and our habits bear no metaphysical significance.

The Realist account has come the closest so far to the way we commonly think about the world. The average person really does not think water boiling each time at 212°F is a mere convention. Yet every system we have seen so far seems to come with a high price. Let us go back again to the fundamentals of Realism and explore what comes in the package with the deal.

One difficult question for Realism is, how does this extreme degree of generality affix itself to the extreme uniqueness of particulars? How does the theory of universals escape the consequence that befell Platonism, that individuals are less than real?

There is no relation for it, says Armstrong.¹⁹ The universals of a particular do not stand in relation to that particular. Universals are not "in" particulars in a relational way, like a worm is when it's in an apple. The worm has the relation of being inside the apple. The connection between a universal and a particular is a non relational tie. Armstrong uses the example of shape and size to illustrate what he means.²⁰ Any object has a shape, and, any object has a size. However, there is no relationship between an object's size and an object's shape. For example, when I crumple a sheet of foil, I am changing the foil's shape. It is still the same size sheet of foil (it has the same area). It could have that size regardless of what shape it was, and it could have that shape regardless of what size it was. There aren't any particulars that have a shape and no size; they must both be present if one of them is to be present. However, size and shape do not determine each other. Therefore, the shape and size of that piece of foil are inextricably connected, though unrelated.

Armstrong applies the same idea to universals and particulars. They are found in the world existing together, never one apart from the other. Even so, they are not in relation to one another. The intricacies of what this means depends on what you take particularity to be. Armstrong muses in one work that an object's position in time and space may be the sum total of particularity.²¹ In such a view, the universal properties of

water are not related to the fact that they reside in a particular place and time, such as in a laboratory beaker. Those properties would be the same regardless of when and where they appeared. Even the relation "x below y" is untouched by any instance where something is below something else. The relation itself is the same no matter what is below what. Although, if no particular thing ever was below another thing, the universal relation would not exist.

When it comes to causation, a Realist equating particularity with spatio-temporality would have to say that the "where and when" of a causal event doesn't carry the causal power. "Where and when" (as spatio-temporal location) make up its particularity. "What and how" carries the punch. What the constituents were (their properties) and how they interacted (their relations) was what brought about a change, not when and where it happened, although, "when and where" cannot be existentially separated out from "what and how," due to their (non relational) tie.

Thus, to return to the kitchen, a universal relation between other universals was the causal power behind what happened. The relation of the properties of pepper to the properties of the human nasal system caused the formerly non sneezing person to sneeze. We call such a "higher-order" universal relation a "law of nature," and believe it to apply to any particular situation wherein persons inhale pepper. Realism translates change occurring in causal events into a relation. "Pepper," "person," and "sneeze" are all linked together through a relation that is itself a universal. That it was you in particular that it happened to may

mean nothing except that the universals have to occur somewhere in a particular.

This Realist explanation in some sense seems to fit our experience. Most people believe that there are laws of nature that we can appeal to when we want to explain why something happened. The problem for Realism begins with the claim that properties and relations are metaphysical entities somehow distinct from particulars. It becomes increasingly important to spell out just what each component is. What is particularity? Claiming spatio-temporal location to be the thing that makes individuals unique is controversial. If it turns out that space and time are nothing apart from the existence of individual things then it could hardly be the cause of particularity. Nominalists avoid this mess by stating that particulars are all that there is. Distinguishing them from anything else is not an issue.

It is also difficult to understand what sort of "entities" universals are, especially when it is claimed that the universals hold the causal power. A Nominalist would say that it is more natural to think of causal activity as occurring in individual circumstances that we describe for ourselves with generalities. Realism appears to be saying something quite opposite. The power of causal activity is in generality. Individual circumstances are implied in our descriptions because universals do not exist without particulars. However, such individual circumstances are not "active" in causal events, which sounds vaguely like an appeal to the Platonic transcendent realm after all. It is difficult to hold the two non related Realist natures of reality together at once in a world view. Perhaps

a similar line of thinking is what led other philosophic systems to separate them out and call one an illusion.

Final Thoughts

In our survey of metaphysical positions, we have seen the meaning for causation shift from being entire momentary existence for Buddhism, eternal form for Platonism, unique in every instance for Nominalism, and subject to universality under Realism. As the explanation for reality has changed, so has the explanation for causation. Explaining causation is inextricably connected to what you consider reality to be.

Studying these systems has also revealed the kinds of quagmires facing metaphysicians. One might set out to explain something quite commonplace, such as the cause of a sneeze, and end up not being able to explain even the basics of the situation, such as what it is that connects one moment to the next, or how individuals exist as individuals at all and what is the nature of their properties. Individuals interacting in causal relations is, as it turns out, extremely problematic.

Of special interest to me is the topic of "non relational connections" raised by D. M. Armstrong. We encountered the non related connection in our section on Realism. Armstrong used it to characterize how the universal inheres in a particular. The example he used to conceptualize it was that of size and shape. You never see the shape of something without there being a size that corresponds to it, yet that same shape could be any size and still be the same shape. The two are not related, but since they never occur separately, they are connected nonetheless. This "non related

connection" is brute. It is not logical; the size of something is not derived from its shape. It is not linguistic; the connection size has to shape isn't something we discuss. It is, however, actual. It is the way things are.

Even though such a conclusion is hard to dispute, what it signals is a drop-off point. The thread of continuity in our chain of analysis is broken when we run into such a "non relational" nexus. Relations bind together what is separate in our understanding. Once we run out of these relations of continuity, our investigative trail vanishes, like a washed out bridge. We are left with unrelated sections and the feeling that there must be a connection, though we don't know what it is.

The cohesion reappears again once the non related pair becomes a fact. For example, it is actuality that connects the size and shape of the document you are now reading. This page could be in a smaller format of this shape, but it isn't. It has the shape and size that it has. We could thus say that it is actuality that relates the non related. The size and shape of this page are related in that they both belong together as the specific properties of a particularly existing document. In a similar vein, this moment that is happening now could be happening differently, but it isn't. It is what it is. Once a moment is actual and becomes history it is related and continuous with all previous moments by the order of succession that it falls into.

Saying that actuality relates the non related is hard to argue with, but it doesn't increase our knowledge much. That is why philosophers call such insights "brute." All we are really saying is, "what happens is

what happens," or, "what is, is." Actuality seems too brute for further analysis.

The non related connection between moments in time and between generality and particularity is at the heart of our investigation into causation. We aren't aware of such gaps in our understanding in normal daily functioning because brute actuality fills in, relating the unrelated. We have consistently run into these gaps, however, in each metaphysical system that we've studied. Each system exposes how we assume a relation to exist only to find that is not so real as we thought when we try to metaphysically account for it. If more insight could be gained into this class of non related connections, perhaps more could be said about causation.

In Buddhism, only the point-instant is real, yet no point instant stands in relation to another point-instant. The connection tying them together is the illusions created by our memory and our imagination. In reality, there can be no relation because there are no individuals to be related. The point-instant is reality in its entirety, extinguishing itself almost as soon as it comes into existence. No part of it is left to relate to the next point-instant except whatever impressions remain in our memory, which doesn't count as anything to a Buddhist. Causation is seen as brute existence--here for a moment and gone--and is utterly unanalyzable. In responding to the challenge of Buddhism we are plunged into the difficulty of metaphysically relating the moments into a theory of duration. In normal functioning we simply assume such a relation exists.

Nominalism is the other view we considered that saw causation as brute existence. The "brutalizing" factor here isn't a metaphysics of time, but that of particularity. Seeing the gap between the particularity of things and the generality of things, they discounted generality as being anything real. Taken to the extreme of allowing no generalities at all, reality is unique in every case. Exposing the non relation between particularity and universality is the specialty of Nominalism. An unfortunate consequence of this stand, however, is that reality becomes unknowable and unanalyzable because our understanding of things comes via generalities.

The greatest contrast to Buddhism and Nominalism is Platonism, because it bases reality on eternity and universality. The non relation declared here is also between particularity and generality, only here the bias is to side with generality. Only the eternal forms are real. Individually existing things are less than real. Causation is the eternal forms standing behind the illusion of ephemeral existence.

Realism allows both generality and particularity to be real even while acknowledging the antagonism between them. Here is a case where the non relation connection is both acknowledged and accepted into a philosophy. Realist philosophers such as Armstrong do choose sides, however, when it comes to causation. Causation is here viewed as a relation between universals, more commonly thought of as "laws of nature." The particular is not involved, though it is necessarily present via its non relational connection to the universals inhering in it.

NOTES

¹ Th. Stcherbatsky, Buddhist Logic Vol. 1 ('S-Gravenhage: Mouton, 1958) 69.

² Stcherbatsky 119.

³ Stcherbatsky 70.

⁴ Stcherbatsky 87.

⁵ Stcherbatsky 118.

⁶ Most notably Richard Taylor.

⁷ This example comes from reading in Schopenhauer.

⁸ Richard Taylor, "Causation," The Monist 47 (1963) : 312-313.

⁹ Plato, The Collected Dialogues of Plato ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961) 81-82.

¹⁰ I actually acquired this notion from Realism, a cousin of Platonism. See D. M. Armstrong, Nominalism and Realism: Universals and Scientific Realism Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978) 112-113.

¹¹ Jorge J. E. Gracia, Introduction to the Problem of Individuation in the Early Middle Ages (Munich: Philosophia Verlag, 1988) 34.

¹² Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions (NY: Philosophical Library, 1957) 15-16.

¹³ Nelson Goodman, Problems and Projects (NY: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972) 159-160.

¹⁴ Bertrand Russell, The Problems of Philosophy (NY: Oxford UP, 1959) 96.

15 David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977) 28.

16 D. M. Armstrong, Universals: An Opinionated Introduction (Boulder: Westview, 1989) 82.

17 Armstrong (1989) 28.

18 D. M. Armstrong, A Theory of Universals: Universals and Scientific Realism Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978) 149.

19 Armstrong (1978, Vol. 1) 108-111.

20 Armstrong (1978, Vol. 1) 110.

21 Armstrong (1978, Vol. 1) 120, 124.

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