

Actual Causation and Compositionality

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Many theories of actual causation implicitly endorse the claim that if c is an actual cause of e , then either c causes e directly or every intermediary by which c indirectly causes e is itself both an actual cause of e and also an actual effect of c . We think this compositionality constraint is plausible. However, as we show, it is not always satisfied by the causal attributions ordinary people make. We conclude by considering what philosophers working on causation should do when the deliverances of their theories diverge from what ordinary people say.

1. Introduction. In this article, we identify a structural constraint—the *compositionality constraint*—that is implicitly endorsed by many accounts of actual causation in the philosophical literature, and we present evidence suggesting that the causal attributions ordinary people make sometimes violate the compositionality constraint. In section 2, we articulate the constraint and argue that many accounts of causation in the literature satisfy it. In sections 3 and 4, we argue that there is reason to predict that ordinary causal attributions do not tend to respect the compositionality constraint in all cases, and we put our prediction to the test. Finally, in section 5, we step back to reflect on the compositionality constraint, the goals of philosophical work on actual causation, and the implications of our results.

2. Articulating the Compositionality Constraint. Causation comes in at least two varieties—structural causation and actual causation. Structural causal relations are something like causal laws. They generate patterns of

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