


## DISCUSSION NOTE

# Answers at Gunpoint: On Livengood and Sytsma's Revolver Case

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(Received 04 May 2020; revised 07 October 2020; accepted 22 January 2021)

## Abstract

Jonathan Livengood and Justin Sytsma have published a series of studies on “Actual Causation and Compositionality,” in which they investigate causal attributions of laypeople. We use one of their vignettes to follow up on their research. Our findings cast doubt on their conclusion that ordinary causal attributions tend to violate the compositionality constraint if one looks at cases in which someone is responsible for an effect by way of an intermediary that does not share in the responsibility.

## 1. Introduction

Jonathan Livengood and Justin Sytsma have published a series of studies in “Actual Causation and Compositionality.” Theories of actual causation, they argue, often at least implicitly endorse a so-called *compositionality constraint*: Imagine that someone, let's name him Alrik, set up a row of domino tiles. He gave the first tile a flick, and as the result of a chain reaction, all the other tiles were knocked over, too. The first tile's falling over was *directly* caused by Alrik's flick. Since subsequently all the other tiles tumbled over, too, Alrik's flick did also cause the last tile in the chain to fall. It was not directly but *indirectly* caused by Alrik's flick. Here, the flick caused some intermediary tiles to fall, which in turn caused the last tile to fall. This can be expressed in a more abstract way: If we look at some individual events, henceforth denoted as  $c$ ,  $d$ , and  $e$ , the compositionality constraint states that, if the event  $c$  caused the event  $e$ , then it did so either directly, or it did so indirectly via one or more intermediaries  $d$ . In this case, every intermediary  $d$  is itself an effect of  $c$  and a cause of  $e$  (Livengood and Sytsma 2020, 44).

This compositionality constraint intuitively seems to be a reasonable desideratum for any adequate theory of actual causation. However, whether it is indeed correct, Livengood and Sytsma argue, is a different kettle of fish. Arguably, it is not enough to solely rely on the intuitions of a single philosopher or of a small, relatively