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PHL 463

Causing and Nothingness

In the paper "causing and nothingness", Hellen Beebee writes about how the network model cannot coexist with absences as causes. In the paper she says that the network model cannot be true if there are no such things as negative events, which is what an absence would be. She would like to defend against the Lewisian argument against relationism that causation is not a relation between events and may not be a relation at all. Hellen Beebee states 3 definitions to try to find a way to sufficiently define absences as causes and denies each of her definitions and conclude therefore that causation by absence does not occur. Finally, she offers a suggestion of why using a commonsense approach would improperly suggest absences as a cause.

Hellen Beebee denies causation by absence because she believes that causation is a relation between two events. She subscribes heavily to the network model of causation and believes that if there is causation by absence than the network model cannot be correct. This is because as she states in the paper "there are no events whose essence is the absence of a property or particular" therefore absences are not events. If absences are not events and this absence is the cause of the of an event than the full causal history is not exhausted by the network, which means the real cause is not being mentioned within the casual network.

She argues that causation by absence would conflict with a commonsense approach because "there are features of common sense to which no theory of metaphysics ought to do justice". She gives 3 definitions to try to deny her argument that absences are not causes. In the first definition she simply states one premise, (a) "The absence of an event type A caused event *b* iff had an A type event occurred than *b* would not have occurred. She says using this definition works and would accept absences as causes! The only problem is this would mean that every absence, in the terms of one event, would be the cause of this single event. For example, if the absence of me watering my plants is a cause of my plants dying, so is the absence of Vladimir Putin watering my plants, as well as the absence of an alien spaceship invading earth and triggering my motion senor sprinklers. She argues that this definition is too inclusive. Her second definition adds the premise (b) "an A-type event cause event b… the absence of a type A event is *abnormal,* or violates moral, legal, epistemic or other norm*"*. This eliminates the issues above by claiming that if an alien spaceship would have invaded earth this would not be normal so the absence of this would not be a cause. This is good except we cannot objectively define what is *normal* or *moral* in certain situations. If I normally do not water my plants than me watering them is not a cause of them dying because me watering them is abnormal. Moreover, if I water them sporadically in this case which would we decide would be normal and which abnormal. Her last definition replaced premise 2 (b) with a different premise (b') "an A-type event cause event b… an A-type event occurs at a world that is *reasonably* close to the actual world". She denies this claim because this would also require arbitrary, subjective considerations. She claims that although it may be possible to distinguish between the relativity of two different worlds and to even distinguish which is closer to the actual world, it would be impossible to decide which world would be "*reasonably close"* enough for the absence of A to count as a cause and which worlds would not.

Lastly, she states her opinion on why the commonsense approach has mistakenly defined absences as causes. In the paper she distinguishes the differences between causation and causal explanations. She says that the canonical form of causal statements is "*c cause e"* where c and e are events and *"caused"* is a two-place relation, but using the form *"E because* C" where C and E are facts and *"because"* is a sentential connective is a causal explanation. Therefore, no causal explanation are causal claims simply because they do not have the logical form and although this mistake may cause no problems in regular everyday talk, it should be regarded in philosophical arguments. Lewis's argument against this would most likely be that facts are the most basic type of causal relationships and that casual explanations are in fact causal claims. Which Beebee would reply facts are not the basic type of causal relationship but actual only reveal a small portion of the casual history.