



Absence Causation and a Critical Review of a Non-Realistic Theory

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Abstract



Causality in some contexts such as “Hamid’s failure to water his plants was a cause of their death.” and “Rickets is caused by a deficiency of vitamin D” can be called "absence causation". In this paper, the main question is whether the use of the term “cause” in such instances due to carelessness and a misuse of language or denotes something that is real and independent of our minds. Defending the first view can be called “anti-realism” in absence causation and the second as “anti-realism”. Helen Beebe is one of the contemporary philosophers that defend anti-realistic theory of absence causation. Her main argument is, in short, as Davidson said, that causation is a relation between events, whereas there are no negative events, therefore, there is no genuine absence causation. However, the main objection that those like her encounter is the common and strong linguistic intuition in sentences like Hamid’s inattentiveness to plants. Beebe has argued that our intuitions in these cases are wrong and the author strives to show that her arguments have failed to achieve this goal.

Keywords

absence causation, causal anti-realism, causal realism, Helen Beebe, Donald Davidson, David Lewis.

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Introduction

In an ordinary sentences like: “Hamid’s failure to water his plants was the cause of their withering.” Non-existential matters have been placed as one side of the causality relationship. More importantly, in some legal or moral claims such as “the death of the patient is caused by his doctor's refusal to perform surgery.” cause or effect is absence. This type of causation can be called “absence causation”. The analysis and study of the different aspects of absence causation has attracted the attention of some philosophers in the past few decades.

In respect to the metaphysics of absence causation, two opposite views can be recognised: realism and anti-realism. According realism, absence causation is genuine and cannot ultimately be reduced to existential causation nor non-causal realities. In contrast, anti-realism does not believe in any genuineness for absence causation and explains it under existential causation or non-causal realities. Helen Beebee is one of contemporary anti-realists in this realm. Going forward, I will try to explain and then evaluate her arguments. I believe her arguments are unable to show the anti-reality of absence causation.

Beebee’s anti-realism and her arguments

Beebee’s main reason to deny the reality of absence causation is upholding Davidsonian view of causation which she calls “non-relationism”. According to this theory, causation is always a relation between events. Her main argument is that believing in a reality for absence causation raises a dilemma, neither option of which can be accepted: either non-relationism (i.e. it is not so that causation is always a relation), or the existence of negative events.

By assuming relationism and caliming that it is the dominant view in contemporary philosophy, Beebee has tried to reject the problems of refuting the reality of absence causation. The most serious objection she encounters is the strong verbal intuition present in previous examples.

Her strategy to rebut the objection consists of two main steps: 1) apart from the abovementioned examples which are positive causal claims about non-existential matters, there are some negative causal claims as well; for example, Hamid who is completely unfamiliar with Sa‘id, and who is unable to put out the fire at Sa‘id’s house, is not the cause for its destruction. According to Beebee a non-relationist must refute these negative claims. Therefore, we have two types of intuitional causal claims about absence causation: positive and negative; a relationist considers negative claims to be false and a non-relationist considers the positive claims to be false. None of them consider both of them to be true. 2) The positive causal claims about absences are false.

To demonstrate the falseness of the positive claims, Beebee has tried to first show that there is no any objective difference between positive and negative causal claims; thus, one of them is necessarily false and next tries to explain them away by explaining our mistake in positive intuitions. Beebee’s explanation for

positive intuitions is to show the possibility of mistaking causal explanation with absence causation. Causation is metaphysical relation between events whereas causal explanation is an epistemic relation between descriptions of events not between events themselves. Although the explanative claim that “Hamid’s plants wilted because he failed to water them” is true but this corresponding causal claim that “Hamid’s inattentiveness to his plants was the cause of their withering” is false. Beebee accepts the explanative role of non-real facts but believes that these facts cannot be one side of a causal relationship.

Assessment of Beebee’s arguments

I think that there are at least four objections to her arguments. The first is that she cannot convince a non-relationist to consider Hamid’s inability in putting out the fire to be the cause for the destruction of Sa’id’s house because, there is no reason for the non-relationist to consider the lack of relation to be a sufficient condition of causation, he simply considers the existence of a relation to not be a necessary condition. The second objection is that Beebee either presupposes falsity of positive causal intuitions or is inclined to conclude - from the possibility of our failure to distinguish between causation and causal explanation – the occurrence of such a mistake, which is incorrect.

The third is that she hasn’t argued on the lack of objective difference between positive causal claims and negative claims but has only presented arguments for not finding a difference. However, not finding is not proof of inexistence.

The fourth is that a non-relationist can, in agreement with Lewis, even in instances of non-relation like the example of Hamid’s inability in putting the fire at Sa’id’s house, give an unvarying judgment and consider Hamid’s inability to be a cause but do not mention it as such because it is not particularly note-worthy. Not mentioning does not equate to not believing. There are many non-existential matters that have a causal role but are usually not mentioned because doing so does not hold any importance.

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