

The Metaphysics of Causation
Graduate Course
Spring 2006
Wednesdays 12-2pm
Silver Center 503, Philosophy Seminar Room

Elizabeth Harman
elizabeth.harman@nyu.edu
Office: Silver Center 503H
Office Hours: Thursdays 1-2pm
Office Phone: 212-998-3546

Course Requirements:

The course requirements include participation in class discussions, one presentation, and one seminar paper.

Presentations will involve approximately five minutes of summary of (some of) the assigned reading, with comments or objections, plus three or four discussion questions. Presenters should have handouts. Maximum handout length is one side of a page.

Auditors are encouraged, but not required, to give presentations.

The seminar paper will be 20-25 pages.

A “paper proposal” of one paragraph will be due on
Wednesday, March 29.

A first draft of the paper will be due on Wednesday, April 19.

The final draft of the paper will be due on Wednesday, May 10.

No incompletes will be granted.

Course Overview:

We will begin by looking at two different types of analyses of causation: regulation theories and counterfactual theories. Then we will turn to more specific questions: Is overdetermination a widespread phenomenon? Do mental and physical causes overdetermine their effects? How is causation at the macro level related to causation at the micro level? Is causation transitive? Is there causation by omission? What are the causal relata?

Four of the authors we will be reading will join us for the discussions of their papers: Karen Bennett, Adam Elga, Sarah McGrath, and Michael Strevens.

We meet on Wednesdays, January 18 through April 26.

No class on Wednesday, March 15 – Spring Break

Possibly no class on Wednesday, March 22 – Pacific APA

Topics and Readings

I. Theories of Causation: Regularity and Counterfactual Theories

A. Regularity Theories

- Mackie, "Causes and Conditions"
- Objections to Mackie's approach:
- Jaegwon Kim, "Causes and Events"

B. Counterfactual Theories

Lewis's Account

- David Lewis, "Causation"

Foundations of Lewis's Account:

- Lewis, excerpts from "Counterfactual Dependence and Time's Arrow"
- Lewis, "Events"

Objections to Lewis's Account:

- Jaegwon Kim, "Causes and Counterfactuals"
- Paul Horwich, "Lewis's Programme"

Other Counterfactual Theories:

- Stephen Yablo, "Cause and Essence"
- Stephen Yablo, "De Facto Dependence"

Lewis's Revised View:

- Lewis, "Causation as Influence"

II. The Problem of Overdetermination

A. Arguments for and against the existence of widespread overdetermination

- Martin Bunzl, "Causal Overdetermination"
- Jonathan Schaffer "Overdetermining Causes"

B. Mental/physical overdetermination

- Karen Bennett, "Why the Exclusion Problem Seems Intractable and How, Just Maybe, to Tract It"

Karen Bennett will join us for the discussion of this issue; the tentative date for her visit is March 8.

III. How Does Causation at the Macro Level relate to Causation at the Micro Level?

- Russell, "On the Notion of Cause"
- Adam Elga, "Isolation and Folk Causation"

Adam Elga will join us on March 29 for the discussion of this issue.

IV. Issues About Transitivity

A. Objections to the transitivity of causation:

- Carolina Sartorio, “On Causing Something to Happen in a Certain Way Without Causing It To Happen”

B. Defenses of transitivity

- L. A. Paul, “Aspect Causation”
- Ned Hall, “Causation and the Price of Transitivity”

V. The Debate over Omissions

A. Arguments against the causal efficacy of omissions

- Phil Dowe, “A Counterfactual Theory of Prevention and ‘Causation’ by Omission”
- Ned Hall, “Non-locality on the cheap”

B. Arguments in favor of the causal efficacy of omissions

- Jonathan Schaffer, “Causation by disconnection”
- Judith Thomson, “Causation: Omissions”
- Sarah McGrath, “Causation by Omission”

Sarah McGrath will join us on April 12 for the discussion of this issue.

VI. Are causal claims just about causation? (Or are they also about explanation?)

- Michael Strevens

Michael Strevens will join us on April 19 for the discussion of this issue.

Possible further topics:

VII. What are the causal relata?

- Sarah McGrath, “Did Gore Cause the Recount?”
- Mellor, “For Facts as Causes and Effects”

VIII. Other analyses of causation

- Ned Hall, “Two Concepts of Causation”
- Tim Maudlin
- Michael Tooley

IX. Is the Quest for an Analysis of Causation Misguided?

- Peter Godfrey-Smith, “The Umbrella of Causation”
- Chris Hitchcock