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What Is It We Do When We Ask Questions about Causes?

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Political scientists talk about “causes” all the time. Yet they have long and deep disagreements about what causation is, what it means to call something a cause, and whether political science accounts should aim to explain causally at all. People (including political scientists) also talk about causes in non-technical, everyday contexts, and it is to this everyday talk that technical political science understandings of causation are ultimately tethered in some way. In this paper, I ask what is it that people do when they ask and answer questions about the causes of human action in everyday contexts in order to explore a few difficulties that political scientists have encountered in thinking about causation.

Note that I refrain here from examining how we talk about causation in the non-human world (e.g. questions like “what caused the big bang?”). People may be doing different things when they ask about the causes of human action on the one hand and non-human events or processes on the other, and a comparison of the two is beyond the scope of this paper. Yet let me just note that talk about the causes of human action is not parasitic, at least historically, on talk about causation in the non-human world. Causal talk in both English and Latin (from which the English-language word “cause” derives) was, from the beginning, directed at explaining human action.

* * *

In positing a relationship between ordinary and scientific languages that is worthy of investigation, I am self-consciously taking a position at odds with a fairly common view articulated here by Sartori:

Whatever else “science” may be, its necessary, preliminary condition resides in the formulation of a *special and specialized language* (not to be confused with a calculus or a formalized language) whose distinctive characteristics is precisely to correct the defects of ordinary language. The various sciences - both the hard and soft ones - took off by inventing neologisms (their own technical vocabulary), by reducing by definition the ambiguity of their key terms, and by consistently abiding by syntactical rules (1984, 56-57).

By this view, it is misguided to investigate connections between ordinary and technical uses of a term because scientifically-reconstructed technical terms have been intentionally created to depart from ordinary use.

I do not think, however, that reconstructive efforts ever fully succeed.¹ Contestation and confusion still surround the meaning of many reconstructed political terms. Despite countless efforts at reconstruction, there is still little consensus among political scientists and philosophers, for instance, about what power, freedom, politics, and democracy “really are,” or how the divergent meanings attached to these terms fit together (Gallie 1955-56; Montefiore 1975; Gray 1977, 1983; Frohock 1978; Connolly 1983).

Furthermore, and relatedly, reconstructed terms are susceptible to what Keller (1992, 10) calls “slippage.” Slippage occurs when the meaning of a term shifts back and forth between its technical (i.e. reconstructed) and ordinary meanings. An example of slippage can be found in Skocpol’s use of “social revolutions” in *States and Social Revolutions*. Her reconstructed definition of this term is as follows: “Social revolutions are rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures; and they are accompanied and are in part carried through by class-based revolts from below” (1979, 4). Yet, as Motyl explains, Skocpol does not adhere

¹ I take part of this argument from Schaffer (2005).

consistently to this definition, and sometimes draws instead upon ordinary meanings of “revolution:”

At times [social revolution] connotes transformations or, more simply perhaps, change; at other times, it clearly is meant to stand for some notion of popular upheaval; at still other times, Skocpol suggests that revolutions and crises are the same, that is to say, that revolutions are merely enormous problems and challenges (1992, 103).

Skocpol’s reconstructive efforts, in short, do not do away with problems of ambiguity.

The larger point is that reconstructed terms remain tethered to the ordinary terms upon which they are based or from which they are derived, and it is this enduring connection that causes the slippage identified by Motyl. Pitkin seems to have something like this in mind when she writes that “technical terms still reflect our conceptual system, in relation to which they must be defined” (1972, 275). Winch describes the nature of these defining relations with regard to “liquidity preference” as used by economists:

Liquidity preference is a technical concept of economics: it is not generally used by businessmen in the conduct of their affairs but by the economist who wishes to *explain* the nature and consequences of certain kinds of business behaviour...Its use by the economist presupposes his understanding of what it is to conduct a business, which in turn involves an understanding of such business concepts as money, profit, cost, risk, etc. It is only the relation between his account and these concepts which makes it an account of economic activity as opposed, say, to a piece of theology (1977, 148-49).

More to the point for the purposes of this paper, Ryle gets at similar idea in his discussion of elemental words like “cause:”

The concepts of *cause, evidence, knowledge, mistake, ought, can*, etc., are not the prerequisites of any particular group of people. We employ them before we begin to develop or follow special theories; and we could not follow or develop such theories unless we could already employ these concepts. They belong to the rudiments of all thinking, including specialist thinking (1953, 170-1).

Technical ways of talking about causes, Ryle is right to argue, are premised on ordinary ways. Consequently, we may gain insight into some of the difficulties political scientists have encountered in thinking about “cause” by taking a careful look at the ordinary uses of this word.

* * *

What is it, then, that we do when we ask and answer questions about the causes of human action in ordinary contexts? As a starting point, consider the following two “what caused person X to” questions:

- (A) What caused Henrietta to arrive late?
- (B) What caused Henrietta to arrive on time?

Assuming that Henrietta usually arrives on time, question A sounds natural and correct in a way that question B does not. It would sound odd to ask what caused Henrietta to arrive on time if she in fact usually arrives on time. Indeed, we normally ask “what caused person X to” questions when the person about whom we are asking *deviates* from (rather than continues on) some normal, habitual, or expected course of action for that person or for people in general. All the questions below, for this reason, sound natural to our ear:

- What caused the contractor to fall from the roof?
- What caused the attorney to quit her job?
- What caused the child to stop going to school?
- What caused the soldier to snap and kill those civilians?
- What caused you to say that this is a triangle?

What caused Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation?

What caused the young singer to take her own life?

What caused the pastor to say such a rude thing?

Peters (1958, 10) characterizes questions of this type as “cases of lapses from action or failure to act....when people as it were get it wrong.” While some “what caused” questions do imply that someone got something wrong – failing to prevent oneself from falling from a roof, for instance – such is not always the case. We cannot conclude, for instance, that Lincoln got something wrong by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. What we can say is that this act was, from a certain perspective, surprising. Insofar as Lincoln had less than two years earlier declared in his inaugural address that he had “no inclination” to interfere with slavery in the states where it existed, his subsequent decision to proclaim the freedom of slaves in many of those states was indeed remarkable and calls for explanation. At the same time, it would sound odd to ask what caused, say, the normally courteous pastor to say something polite. Insofar as we have come to expect this pastor to say polite things, we would not typically think to inquire about the causes of his politeness.

We can also ask “what caused person X to” questions when a person’s beliefs, views, motives, or the like come to deviate from what is expected for that person or people in general.

What caused Rand Paul to see the virtue of our beliefs [when just last week he condemned them]?

What caused Snooki to believe what her father said [everyone knows her father is a liar]?

What caused Anders Behring Breivik to think that it is okay to go to a youth camp and slaughter children?

What caused Lois to want to end her marriage [she seemed so happy]?

In contrast, it would sound odd to ask what caused some “normal” Norwegian man to think that it was not okay go to a youth camp and slaughter children, for we do not expect Norwegian men to hold such a view.

Another observation we can make about “what caused person X to” questions relates to the types of answers that we ordinarily give to them. Suffice it to say that there are a whole range of answers that would normally be considered appropriate, depending of course on the context:

What caused the contractor to fall from the roof?

The wind picked up.

She lost her balance.

She got distracted.

She chose not to wear her safety harness.

She violated the company’s standard safety procedures.

What caused the young singer to take her own life?

She could no longer afford the cost of her anti-depressants.

She blamed herself for her mother’s death.

She read too much existential philosophy.

She stopped believing that suicide is forbidden by God.

She was protesting what she considered to be an unjust war.

What caused Rand Paul to see the virtue of our beliefs [when just last week he condemned them]?

He had a change of heart.

He discovered his son was gay.

He gave the issue some deeper thought.

He finally stopped listening to his father.

He doesn't really see the virtue in our beliefs; his vote yesterday was purely strategic.

What caused you to say that this is a triangle?

I wasn't wearing my glasses.

Look, it has three sides.

I was sleepy.

It only has two dimensions.

The lines are practically straight.

Contrary to those who might suppose that inquiring about causes is to ask about “external” forces rather than “internal” motives, reasons, and understandings, we see that it can sound perfectly natural to talk about motives, reasons, and understandings in response to “what caused person X to” questions, depending on the context. Accounts that focus on choosing, protesting, blaming oneself, making judgments, giving thought, having a change of heart (as well as yearning, believing, deciding, wanting, perceiving, etc.) may all be acceptable answers to inquiries about what caused a person to do something.

* * *

We can make similar observations about other kinds of cause questions. Consider, first, “what caused X to” questions, where X is not a person, but an institution, country, group of people, or the like:

What caused the United States to declare war on Germany?

What caused the Americans to rebel?

What caused the Environmental Protection Agency to reverse its own ruling?

What caused the United Nations to send troops to Bosnia-Herzegovina?

What caused the Soviet Union to collapse?

In such questions, we endow the group, institution, country, etc. with agency or structure. And we are moved to ask about causes because we are surprised at some action that they have taken (declaring war, rebelling, sending troops, etc.) or at a change to an expected, normal, or healthy state that they have experienced (such as collapsing). And in answering such questions we may well find it natural, in the right context, to adduce motives, reasons, and understandings (“the Americans wanted more autonomy;” “the Soviet people no longer believed in Communism” etc.).

Or consider “What caused X” questions, where X is a (human) event or process:

What caused the French revolution?

What caused the great depression?

What caused the decline of the Roman empire?

What caused the housing bubble in the United States?

Again, in answering this type of question, we may well find it natural to adduce motives, reasons, and understandings (e.g., “it was greed that caused the housing bubble”). As well, when we ask this type of question we point attention to the occurrence of something surprising – often an event or process such a revolution, decline, accident (though without identifying who or what may have caused it). It sounds natural to ask “what caused the housing bubble in the United States?” but we would not normally ask what caused a housing bubble to not occur, unless of course we had good reason to believe that it could or should have occurred, in which case we might ask something like “why was there no housing bubble in Switzerland [even though so many other countries experienced one]”? It would sound odd or clumsy, in contrast, for someone to ask instead “what caused there to be no housing bubble in Switzerland?” When we ask cause questions, we often inquire about occurrences that depart in some way from what is normal, habitual, or expected. We want to know “what caused” someone to say something rude or change her mind; “what caused” a country to declare war or send troops; “what caused” a powerful empire to collapse. It is perhaps for this reason that “what caused there to be no” sounds awkward: nothing happened to provoke our surprise. In contrast, we do ask why questions even when “nothing happened.” Thus it sounds natural to ask “why was there no revolution in India?” or “why has there never been a revolution in India?” but awkward to say “what caused there to be no revolution in India?” and downright ugly to utter “what caused there to never be a revolution in India?” Tellingly, a search of Google Books yields more than 200,000 results for “why was there no,” but zero occurrences of “what caused there to be no.”

We also need to examine cause questions in the present tense, which complicates a bit the observation that we ask cause questions about deviations from the normal, habitual, or expected.

The present tense, after all, can be used in cause questions (and in the English language generally) to indicate that the phenomenon in question occurs repeatedly. Take, for instance, the following questions:

What causes revolution?

What causes poverty?

What causes John to always speak his mind?

What causes almost all Americans to follow industrial callings? (to quote Henry Reeve's translation of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Book II, chapter XIX).

In each of these questions, the present tense is used to indicate that the phenomenon in question (revolutions, poverty, John speaking his mind, Americans following industrial callings) occurs or appears again and again. Yet even in these cases, the "what causes" question is used to indicate that the phenomenon is in some way unexpected or abnormal. Thus Tocqueville, for instance, observes that in European countries like France, only a limited number of people take up industrial and commercial occupations, whereas in the United States almost everyone does, an oddity that he attributes to the extreme equality of conditions that define American democracy. Thus Reeve finds it appropriate to translate Tocqueville's original "*ce qui fait pencher*" with "what causes." It is also noteworthy that just as with past-tense cause questions, answers to "what causes" questions can include motives, reasons, and understandings ("it's a sense of injustice that causes revolution," etc.).

One additional observation about "what causes" questions is in order. There are contexts in which to ask "why" is to ask something different from asking about "cause," and such differences are particularly pronounced in questions posed in the present tense. When we ask, say,

“why is there war?” we seem to be inviting a set of answers that do not overlap completely with the answers that we invite by asking “what causes war?” To the “why” question someone may well answer “there is no good reason for war; it serves no purpose,” an answer that would sound odd to the “what causes” question. Some “why” questions, it appears, can be construed to mean “what grand purpose does X serve?” or “what larger meaning should we attribute to X?” in a way that “what causes” questions cannot.

* * *

There are still other kinds of cause questions, most notably “what is/was the cause of,” and “what are/were the causes of.” Without belaboring an analysis of these question types, let me just say that their uses do not appear, at first blush at least, to be grossly different than those of the cause questions examined above. There is also, to be sure, a much finer analysis one could work up of what we do when we ask all the different types of cause questions, and the ways in which we do different things when we ask why and cause questions. This paper has only scratched the surface of these topics to be sure.² Nonetheless, the present analysis does suggest that despite some differences between the various kinds of cause questions, we can identify two similarities in their use. In all of the permutations here examined it seems that (1) we inquire about causes when we are surprised, and (2) it is perfectly acceptable when answering such questions to invoke

² For other directions such an analysis might go, see Pitkin (1972, 264-72) and Wittgenstein (1965, 15, 88, 143; 1966, 11-18).

reasons, motives, and understandings as causes, context permitting. Of what significance are these two observations for those engaged in political science research?

Reasons, Motives, and Understandings as Causes

That we often assign motives, reasons, and understandings as causes of human action in everyday contexts should be taken note of by political scientists for two reasons. On the one hand, it points to the potential poverty of causal accounts offered up by those positivist scholars who for whatever reason choose to disregard motives, reasons, and understandings. King, Keohane, and Verba (1994), for instance, warn against using concepts like motivation or intention in causal explanations because these concepts are “abstract, unmeasurable, and unobservable” (110). What is needed, they argue, are concrete indicators of such concepts that can be observed and measured. By this view, if something cannot be measured it cannot be part of a causal account. But what are we to make, say, of the woman who shouts out, moments before taking her life at the gates to the Pentagon, that she intends to do so to protest the prosecution of a war she finds unconscionable? To be sure, the observable context of her utterance and acts are crucial for us to consider (Rubinstein 1977). That she chose the gates of the Pentagon during a time of war certainly needs to be part of our account. But how are we to “measure” her statement and the context in which she made it? What are their size, amount, or degree? To the extent that we cannot answer such questions with precision, King, Keohane, and Verba tell us, we must forgo talk of motives or intentions in our causal account, a move that would surely leave us with an impoverished or incorrect understanding of what caused the woman to take her own life.

On the other hand, and relatedly, the insight that motives, reasons, and understandings often figure into our everyday causal accounts points to the untenability of the position taken by some interpretivist scholars who eschew inquiring about causes because to do so necessarily means inquiring about external, mechanical forces. Gunnell (1968, 193), for one, seems to adopt such a position when he argues that:

Whatever the source of the assumption that explanations of action must be causal....any thoroughgoing attempt to explain action and the relationship between mental episodes and observed behavior in causal terms, that is, the language of physical events, will necessarily founder and lead to insuperable theoretical problems.

Gunnell here mistakenly conflates giving a causal account with giving a casual account couched solely in the language of physical events. Were he only critiquing the kind of explanatory limits proposed by King, Keohane, and Verba, his concern might be justified. But we need not accept those limits as our own. We have seen that people often adduce reasons, talk about motives, and reference understandings when they give causal accounts in everyday contexts. A distinction between “mental” accounts on the one hand and “causal” accounts on the other does not hold up.³

One gets the sense that Gunnell is reacting to those in the scientific community who have sought, following in the footsteps of Hume, to define causality in mechanical terms as observable patterns of regularity that are contiguous in time and place (that which precedes the other is called the “cause” and the other the “effect”). Imagine, as Hume (2007 [1777]) did, one billiard ball hitting another.

³ Davidson (1963) in his discussion of “rationalization” and Wight (2004) in his discussion of “conceptual” causal mechanisms make a similar point.

But we should not forget, even within the realm of philosophy, there are other ways of conceptualizing causality. The most enduring, surely, is that of Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, Book I Chapter iii, 983a, b), who identified four kinds of causes: formal (“the ‘reason why’ of a thing”), material (“the matter or substrate”), efficient (“the source of motion;” it is this type of cause that most resembles Hume’s conception), and final (“the purpose or ‘good’”).⁴ Much could be said about this Aristotelean approach, but I limit myself to simply noting that Aristotle’s more expansive conception of causality is today attracting the attention of political scientists who are critical of the narrower Humean tradition (see, for instance, Wendt 2003, Kurki 2008).

Be that as it may, it is important to note that Aristotle did not write about “cause.” He wrote about “αἴτιον” (aition). The English-language word “cause” comes from the Latin word “*causa*,” which itself apparently derives from “*caudo*,” or “I strike, cut” (Conway 1923, 62; de Vaan 2008, 101), and may have meant something like “giving blow for blow” or “tit for tat” (De Villiers 1926, 404). By extension, *causa* came also to mean “dispute,” and in classical times it gets used in the legal realm to mean “lawsuit” (Ibid). The 1982 edition of the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* lists a number of meanings for the term, among them:

Judicial proceedings, a legal case, trial.

The case (including the interests) of one side in a legal or other dispute, plea, cause, side.

A case or plea considered from the point of view of its merits, a (good, etc.) case, claim.

An alleged reason or extenuating plea, excuse, pretext.

A ground (of action), justificatory principle, (good) reason.

A motive, reason (for an action).

⁴ I quote here the English translation of Hugh Tredennick.

A causal or metaphysical principle of any kind; a rational principle; a causal explanation.

A causal agency, cause.

The origin, source, history (of something); the derivation (of a word).

Responsibility, blame (for).

Both the place of *causa* in the realm of law and an understanding of *causa* in terms of reasons and motives have carried over into the English language. In the legal realm, judges and lawyers in the United States often speak of “having good cause,” “challenging for cause,” “probable cause,” and “cause of action” – all of which are used to refer in some way to having proper or adequate reasons for acting in particular way. In these uses, “cause” does not refer to a mechanistic force but to a reason that justifies taking a specific course of action.⁵ Such specialized but stock uses in the realm of law again point to how central reasons and the like are to extra-scientific (or more precisely, extra-Humean) ways in which people talk about “causes.”

Surprises

Some scholars have argued that talk about causes is ubiquitous in everyday life. Brady, for instance, has asserted that “almost no one goes through a day without uttering sentences of the form *X caused Y* or *Y occurred because of X*” (2008, 217). In one sense, Brady surely exaggerates. We have seen that literal “what causes/caused” questions are not, how shall we say it, routine. In our ordinary-language use, we ask cause questions when we encounter surprises for which we

⁵ Some obsolete English-language phrases included in the *Oxford English Dictionary* point to the same set of meanings. In 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries, “cause why” meant something like “reason why.” In the 14th century, “by the cause that” meant “for the reason that; with the purpose that, to the end that, in order that,” while “by the cause of” – a phrase that eventually evolved into “because” – meant “for the reason of, on account of.”

want explanation. We ask them when the routinized or the expected is violated. By Hume's conception, in contrast, to invoke the language of causes is to take notice of uniformity. To ask about causes in ordinary language is to inquire about the irregular, to investigate Humean causes is to seek regularity.

This difference between cause as an explanation of surprise and cause as an account of regular conjunction maps in one intriguing way onto the distinction that Arendt (1958, 38-49, 191) draws between action and behavior. Action, by Arendt's conception, is singular and unpredictable whereas behavior is conformist and predictable. It is interesting and perhaps troubling to note that a good deal of political science research is premised upon and investigates behavior in this Arendtian sense. The rational choice approach to studying politics, for one, is premised upon people behaving in routinized, predictable ways. For this reason, rational choice models, as one proponent concedes, "are not usually useful for explaining acts of extraordinary heroism, stupidity, or cruelty" (Geddes 2003, 181). But it is often acts that we perceive to be extraordinarily heroic, stupid, or cruel which provoke us pose "what caused" questions:

What caused the passerby to run into the burning building to save a person she had never met?

What caused President Bush to decide that going to war against Iraq was in our national interest?

What caused the father to disown his son?

Some political science research, to be sure, does investigate the extraordinary, even if it is not always couched in "what caused" questions. To cite just two examples, Fujii (2009) asks what caused neighbors to kill neighbors during the Rwandan genocide, while Monroe (2006) asks what caused ordinary people to risk their own lives in order to rescue Jews during World War II. At the

heart of both Fujii's and Monroe's books are in-depth interviews that the two authors conducted with the actors in question. Fujii and Monroe examine carefully the stories that people tell to access the reasons and motives that stood behind the extraordinary actions that interest them. But the kind of narrative analysis undertaken by Fujii and Monroe is relatively rare in political science. Many political science tools – rational choice and statistical modeling to name just two – are not geared towards investigating the extraordinary. When one searches only for Humean patterns of observable regularity (sometimes referred to as “generalization” or “general laws”), only behavior in the Arendtian sense receives attention. In short, there is sometimes a disjuncture between the kinds of (surprising) human actions about which people think to ask causal questions and the kinds of tools political scientists have developed to explain (regularized) human behavior. Consequently, when political scientists forgo investigating the extraordinary only because it cannot be adequately explored by tools developed to explain the ordinary, they divert our attention from some of the causal questions we most want to ask.

* * *

There are, in summary, three conclusions that I draw from this inquiry into the ordinary use of cause questions. First, positivist scholars who eschew consideration of motives, reasons, and understandings when investigating the causes of human action are in danger of providing accounts that are misleading or off the mark. Second, interpretivist scholars who refrain from investigating causal questions because they believe to do necessarily entails providing only mechanistic explanations mistakenly conflate causal accounts in general with Humean accounts of

causality, and thereby overly restrict the scope of their analyses. Lastly, the kinds of tools political scientists have developed to explain regularized human behavior divert attention from inquiry into the extraordinary, and thus too from some of the causal questions we most want to ask.

Having said all this, I must also include a caveat. Upon further investigation, it may turn out that my observations about everyday cause questions are overly simplistic, and it may thus also be that my subsequent reflections on political-science thinking about causation are muddled. Even if this is the case, I do not believe that this exercise has been pointless. If nothing else, we might consider this paper as an invitation to inquire more deeply into what it is we all ordinarily do when we ask and answer questions about the causes of human action (for we have seen that there is more going on here than one might at first expect), and to use that deeper understanding to critically assess the state of causal thinking in political science.

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