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SINGULARISM

by Ann Whittle

I

Observations on the nature of the singular causal relation seem to pull us in two directions. First, we have what could be called the Generalist's Observation. This draws our attention to the fact that causal relations are part of more general patterns. If C causes E, this seems to imply something about similar situations in which C-type and E-type entities are present. If, for instance, a balloon landed on something sharp and burst, we'd expect similar balloons to burst if they landed on things equally as sharp. The generalist's observation can be articulated by the principle of the nomological character of causation (NCC). This states that whenever there is a causal relation between two entities, C and E, there is a causal law that subsumes them (at least under some description of C and E).[1] The idea is that because the relation between C and E will be part of a more general pattern, it will follow from a more general causal truth or law.

The second observation draws our attention to a very different aspect of the causal relation – its seemingly local character. Whether or not two entities are causally related looks as if it should depend solely on what happens between those two things. The enjoyment caused by the chocolate Alice is now eating, for instance, doesn't seem

[1] See, for example, Davidson 1970 p.215.

to depend upon anything outside the relation between Alice's eating chocolate and her enjoyment. In particular, it does not appear to rely on past or future events of a similar sort, nor upon events occurring at different places. It seems only to concern what is going on at the time and place of Alice's eating the chocolate. This observation pushes us towards the singularist's thesis (ST). This states that the causal connection between two relata doesn't depend upon anything extraneous to that relation. Rather, the truthmakers of singular causal statements are entities which are local and intrinsic to those relations.[2]

We have, then, two very different but plausible theses about the nature of the singular causal relation. The question I shall consider here is this: can we incorporate both ST and NCC in a theory of causation?

II

Anscombe, who has been important in the development of singularism, suggests that we cannot satisfy both ST and NCC. She argues that singular causal facts cannot be determined by facts about causal laws, because nomic facts are unable to capture what is essential to causation. She writes,

> Effects derive or come out of their causes…Now analysis in terms of necessity or universality does not tell us of this derivedness of the effect; rather it forgets about that. For the necessity will be that of laws of nature; through it *we* shall be able to derive

[2] On an intuitive understanding of intrinsicity, something is intrinsic to a relation if it is determined by what lies within the confines of that relation, and so would remain part of that relation regardless of what occurred outside of it.

> knowledge of the effect from its cause, or vice versa, but that does not show us the cause as source of the effect.[3]

Anscombe thus endorses ST, because she thinks that an analysis of the causal relation must be given in terms of particular causes and effects. However, she suggests that accepting the claim that singular causal facts are not determined by causal laws undercuts our right to claim that causal relations are subsumed under laws. For if we say that causal laws are not necessary for causal relations (as the latter are not determined by the former), then C can be the cause of E even if C and E are not subsumed under a causal law. Hence, there is no reason to suppose that causal relations will always be subsumable under causal laws.

Anscombe is right to think that there is a natural connection between ST and the denial of NCC. If we claim that the truthmakers of causal statements are entities which are local and intrinsic to those causal relations, then we have to deny that general causal facts determine the causal relations, as they will be extraneous to these relations. This leads to scepticism about the generalist's claim that causal relations will be part of more general patterns and hence subsumable under causal laws. For why should C causing E imply anything about other C-types causing E-types if, as ST claims, C is the cause of E simply in virtue of local, intrinsic facts of the relation between C and E? Anscombe thus poses a challenge: why should NCC hold, if causal relations are not determined by causal laws?

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[3] 1971, p.92.

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III

Foster and Tooley's form of singularism may be thought to provide a response to this challenge.[4] They endorse the Anscombe-sounding claim that not all singular causal facts are reducible to (Foster) or supervenient upon (Tooley) facts about causal laws, because there are possible situations in which indeterministic causal laws fail to determine which cause is paired up with which effect.[5] When this happens, they claim that there is an irreducible singular causal fact which determines the pairing. Consequently, it is wrong to say that causal laws (plus non-causal facts) determine all the singular causal facts.

This claim, however, is compatible with NCC. The fact that extra causal facts may be required in order to determine which cause is paired up with which effect, doesn't demonstrate that causal relations are not instances of causal laws. We might think that despite this failure of supervenience, all relations have to be subsumed under some law in order to be causal. This would be the case, for instance, if we thought that laws, while not the sole truthmakers of causal statements, were nevertheless among them. Indeed, this sort of position seems to be one that Tooley endorses.[6] Thus, Foster and Tooley's view does not force us to reject NCC.

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[4] Their position is usually classified as a form of singularism due to its links with Anscombe. However, if we take ST to be essential to singularism then, as we'll see, not all variations of this view will be singularist.

[5] See Foster 1985 part III, § 7 and Tooley 1987 ch. 6. All the scenarios outlined depend upon the causal laws being indeterministic.

[6] At least in 1987. There, Tooley argues for the view that 'underlying laws are necessary if there are to be causal relations' but 'laws together with relevant causal facts are not always sufficient to determine that causal relations obtain' (p.203).

We have, then, an account which can combine NCC with the thesis that causal laws fail to reduce the singular causal facts (call this thesis, FT). Furthermore, FT is also compatible with ST, as Anscombe's analysis of causation clearly incorporates both of these theses. This alone, however, does not suffice to show that a version of FT could reconcile ST with NCC, as FT does not entail ST. In order to see this, consider the case just given. There laws were said to be part of the truthmakers of causal relations. To make the example more concrete, suppose that laws are analysed via Lewis's 'best-system theory'.[7] If these laws are part of the truthmakers of causal statements (as they are on Lewis's counterfactual analysis), then ST will not hold. For Lewis's laws are just those global patterns of reoccurrence which appear in the best scientific systems. Consequently, if they are among the truthmakers of causal statements, causal relations will be partly determined by entities which are extraneous to them.

Is there any reason to suspect that those accounts which combine both FT and NCC, cannot also incorporate ST? There are grounds for scepticism. FT theorists, such as Tooley, are able to combine FT with NCC by utilising the generalist's rationalisation for NCC. In other words, they can say that causal laws are among the truthmakers of causal statements. But Anscombe's challenge was to explain why NCC should hold, given that no part of what it is to say that 'A causes B' is 'comprised' of the general causal truth 'A-types cause B-types'.[8] Now Anscombe did have good reason to insist upon this, since it is difficult to see how ST could hold even if laws are just one of the truthmakers of causal statements. Laws concern facts about what happens in all eons.

[7] See Lewis 1986, p.122.

[8] See Anscombe 1971, p.92.

Therefore, if they are responsible for the truth of causal statements, it looks as if causal relations cannot be determined solely by entities which are local and intrinsic to those relations.[9] This unresolved difficulty justifies the limited conclusion that FT gives us no indication of how we might go about reconciling ST and NCC.

IV

A more promising response to Anscombe's challenge is suggested by Ducasse's brand of singularism. He writes,

> a causal connection explains the regularity of the succession, but it is not constituted by such regularity, which is but a corollary of the causal connection.[10]

The thought here is that although regularities of E-types following C-types are not part of what makes the singular causal statement 'C causes E' true, these regularities are nevertheless implied by the causal relation. But why is this? Ducasse suggests that it is because causal laws are constituted out of 'a class of resembling facts', each of which 'already happened to be a causal fact individually and in its own right'.[11] The position outlined by Ducasse, therefore, is stronger and more positive than that offered by either Anscombe or FT. For rather than just making the negative claim that causal relations

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[9] I believe that there is one account of the laws of nature, namely Armstrong's, which is able to combine the generalist's rationalisation for NCC with ST. I don't think it offers a convincing rapprochement of NCC and ST, however, as it relies on the implausible thesis that spatiotemporal universals can be wholly present at different places at the same time. Due to the limits of space, I cannot pursue this line here, but it does not count against the qualified conclusion I draw.

[10] 1926, p.130.

[11] 1926, p.129.

are not determined by causal laws, Ducasse suggests that it is facts about causal relations which determine facts about causal laws.

If we endorse this claim, we are making a radical break with the generalist's approach. However, it is still not clear why NCC should hold. NCC doesn't follow from Ducasse's claim that causal relations determine causal laws, for there may still be some causal relations which do not give rise to any causal laws and so are not subsumable under them. What we require, is an account which incorporates Ducasse's thesis with the claim that the existence of a causal relation guarantees the existence of a causal law. This would enable us to explain why causal relations are instances of more comprehensive causal laws, without thereby undermining ST.

Is it possible to formulate such an account? I think it is. Suppose that we take causation to be a particular relation between tropes. So, in any instance of singular causation, tropes are the entities which are doing the causal work. This may be because causation is reducible to certain facts about the tropes of the causal relation, or because relations which are causal are related by an irreducible causal necessitation trope. The details of the account don't matter for these purposes, since as long as the truthmakers of singular causal relations are tropes, the account will be compatible with ST. Why? Tropes are sui generis property instances, such as 'the redness of *this* poppy' or 'the love of Bob for Katy'. Two of their features make them suited for the role outlined here. First, tropes are spatiotemporal particulars, so they have a unique, spatiotemporal location. Second, they are not analysable in terms of instantiations of universals. This allows tropes to be wholly present and intrinsic to the entities which have them, as they

are not comprised of general entities which exist outside the confines of the particular that possesses them.[12] If tropes determine causal relations, therefore, the truthmakers of singular causal statements will be entities which are local and intrinsic to those relations, as ST demands.

Although tropes are particulars, trope theorists claim that sets of tropes form natural or genuine universals. How are these tropes grouped together into sets? This question is usually answered by appealing to the relation of exact resemblance, but this is not as lucid as we might hope. First, it fails to offer an account of what it is to belong to the set of tropes which stand for the universal P-ness, rather than, say, the universal G-ness or F-ness. Second, in some cases it may be unclear what it is for two tropes to exactly resemble each other. Two tropes of charge will not be identical in every respect since, according to trope theorists, these entities are particular. Consequently, we have to say that their qualitative, non-particularised aspects are precisely similar. But what does this amount to for tropes like charge? We can't just imagine what two precisely similar tropes of charge look like, as we may be able to tropes of red. Third, it is not obvious that we should say that all tropes in a set have to exactly resemble each other. If the tropes were property instances of the determinable red, for instance, then this criterion would be too stringent.

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[12] Both traditions regarding the nature of tropes view them as intrinsic to the entities that instantiate them. Stout (1921) takes tropes to be independent parts of the wholes they constitute. They are thus intrinsic to the entities they comprise, because they literally lie within their confines. Husserl (1901) takes tropes (what he calls 'moments') to be wholly dependent on the wholes of which they're part. Consequently, tropes are intrinsic to the wholes which possess them, because they are entirely dependent on these wholes.

I think we can improve on this standard account by utilising Shoemaker's functionalist theory of properties (1981). Shoemaker argues that properties should be understood in terms of their functional roles. However, we can also utilise his account in order to provide a more precise specification of how tropes (which stand for genuine universals) are grouped into sets. Those tropes which implement the functional role definitive of a universal form a set, which grounds genuine resemblances between particulars. So the idea is that tropes belong to the same set, and are thus instances of the same universal, if they meet certain causal requirements laid down by the functional definition for that universal. Trope C^1 and trope C^2, for example, are members of the set which stands for the universal of charge, if and only if both C^1 and C^2 implement the causal role described by the functional definition for the property of charge.

If we adopt this view, then causal relations will be guaranteed to be part of more general patterns. Take, for instance, the causal relation 'Jack's fall caused his crown to break'. The events 'Jack's falling' and 'his crown breaking' possess certain tropes, the most crucial ones being Jack's trope of falling and his crown's trope of breaking. These tropes belong to sets, the members of which all implement the same nexus of causal relations. Thus, if Jack's trope of falling and his crown's trope of breaking are causally related (given certain circumstances), then Jill's trope of falling and her crown's trope of breaking will also be (given the same circumstances), since Jill's trope of falling and her crown's trope of breaking enter into the same causal relations as Jack's trope of falling and his crown's trope of breaking.

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The existence of the causal relation between Jack's trope of falling and his crown's trope of breaking, therefore, guarantees the existence of a more general pattern. This general pattern will have a law-like description of the form: in circumstances C, the universal of falling nomically necessitates the universal of breaking. Thus, we can say that the causal relation 'Jack's fall caused his crown to break' is subsumed under a law, because it is an instance of this more comprehensive causal law. The same will also hold for all other causal relations, but this won't be because causal laws are truthmakers of singular causal statements, rather it is because singular causal relations automatically give rise to laws.

V

On this proposal, causal relations will be part of more general patterns describable by causal laws, in accordance with NCC, because relations between tropes give rise to more general relations between properties. Furthermore, what determines the causal relations will be local and intrinsic to those relations, as the singularist claims, since causal relations are entirely determined by their tropes. Therefore, it is possible to reconcile NCC and ST. This enables us to keep what seems plausible about generalism, without thereby loosing what seems right about singularism.[13]

Department of Philosophy
University College London
Gower Street

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London, WC1E 6BT
a.whittle@ucl.ac.uk

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