

*On David Lewis and the Problem of Absence Causation*

Jack Hawke

*The counterfactual analysis of causation*, proposed and popularised by David Lewis, has structured a major research agenda in contemporary metaphysics. One of the problems facing Lewis' counterfactual approach is the *problem of absence causation*: how can an absence, the nonoccurrence of an event, cause anything or be caused by anything? Lewis later proposed a drastically different account to address the problem of absence causation. The first half of this paper focuses on Lewis' original account of causation, the three options he considers to account for absence causation, and his preferred approach. I evaluate the three options and raise problems for all of them. The second half of the paper puts pressure on the idea that absences need to be accounted for by an analysis of causation in the first place. I present two problems for this idea: what I call the 'Problem of Overinclusion' (PO)—when accounting for absences commits us to counting an implausibly high number of cases as causation, and what I call the 'Problem of Normativity' (PN)—when, in seeking to account for absences, our causal judgements are illegitimately influenced by normative judgements. I present these two problems as a dilemma. Those who seek an account for absence causation must choose between either PN or PO, and in doing so shift the burden of proof to advocates of absence causation.

*Jack is a recent graduate from the Australian National University with a BA in Politics, Philosophy and Economics, and an Honours in philosophy. Jack's interests are metaphysics, epistemology, AI and bioethics, and global priorities research.*

## I. Introduction

In “Causation,” David Lewis provides an influential account of causation based on *counterfactual dependence*.<sup>1</sup> Later, Lewis began to worry about the problem of absence causation and thus considered different ways of addressing it.<sup>2</sup> The idea that an absence—the nonoccurrence of an event—can cause anything or be caused by anything poses difficulties for his counterfactual analysis of causation by leading to some unintuitive consequences, undermining either the very concept of events or the applicability of Lewis’s counterfactual analysis. Three cases of absence causation are of interest here: *omission* (the cause is an absence), *prevention* (the effect is an absence), and *prevention by omission* (both the cause and the effect are absences). In cases involving omissions, Lewis considers three ways to make sense of them: (I) there are events of omission that are *essentially specifiable*; (II) there are no events of omission; (III) there are events of omission that are not essentially specifiable. For reasons that I will explain, Lewis favours (II).

In this essay, I argue first that there are problems facing each of (I), (II), and (III). Second, and against Lewis, I argue that it is the defenders and not the opponents of absence causation who bear the burden of proof to explain their view. In §2, I briefly explain Lewis’s original account of causation. §3 describes the problem of absence causation and the three potential solutions considered by Lewis. I evaluate them in §4, agreeing with Lewis that treating absences as facts is more favourable than treating

---

1 I would like to thank Daniel Stoljar and Phil Dowe for their generous comments and encouragement on this paper, as well as being a very pleasant and helpful presence during my time in Honours. I also thank my supervisor, Garrett Cullity, for encouraging me to take up the course on David Lewis (the lack of his encouragement would cause the absence of this paper!) Discussions with Tim and the thoughtful comments from Evelyn and Zoe also greatly improved this paper, and I am very grateful to all of them. Finally, I thank Alex and Sebastian, whose warmth and support helped make my Honours journey successful and rewarding.

2 David Lewis, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); David Lewis, “Causation as Influence,” In *Causation and Counterfactuals*, ed. John Collins, Ned Hall and L. A. Paul (Boston: MIT Press, 2004), 75-106.

them as specifiable events, while arguing that Lewis' approach also faces problems. I argue in §5 that defenders of absence causation face a dilemma: they have to pick between what I call the "Problem of Normativity" and the "Problem of Overinclusiveness." Finally, I address an objection that my argument is cherry-picking in §6, and offer a reflection on the very project of a *metaphysical* analysis of causation in the conclusion based on my aforementioned discussions.

## II. Lewis's Original Account of Causation

In *Causation*, Lewis provides a way to analyse causation in terms of *counterfactual dependence*, which involves counterfactual conditionals of the forms "If A had not happened, C would not have happened," and "If A were the case, C would be the case." First, some context. Lewis is a *modal realist*—in other words, he believes that there exist many worlds that are spatio-temporally and causally separate from our world yet equally as 'real.' That is, no pair of worlds have any overlapping space, time, or causal relations between them. Additionally, our world is the *actual world* to us; actuality is *indexical* or world-relative according to Lewis. Modal realism enables Lewis to analyse modal statements in the following way: to say that something is possible is just to say that there is at least one world where it holds, and to say that something is a necessary truth is just to say that it is true in all worlds.

Lewis' definition of counterfactual dependence states that if there are any two propositions A and C, the statement "C counterfactually depends on A" (denoted by 'A  $\square$  C') is true at world w if and only if:

- (A) There are no possible A-worlds; or
- (B) Some A-world that also happens to be a C-world is closer to w than any A-world that is also a non-C-world.

If (A) holds, then the counterfactual is vacuously true. Furthermore, (B) tells us that establishing the truth of  $(A \square C)$  is a matter of finding out whether some A-and-C-world is more *similar* to the actual world than is any A-and-non-C-world. For example, the water being spilt counterfactually depends on my tilting the cup iff in the closest world where I tilt the cup, the water is spilt.

How does Lewis understand the similarity relation between worlds? This is spelled out in a later paper.<sup>3</sup> The important thing here is that Lewis thinks that having a small, localised ‘miracle,’ that is, a violation of a law of nature, is less bad with respect to accomodating for similarity than having a large difference in the spatio-temporal similarity between two worlds or widespread miracles. Lewis proposes his own account of the laws of nature, in which he understands a violation of a law as consisting in cases like pressing a switch which works perfectly well but the light does not turn on.<sup>4</sup> Note that such cases involve a violation only from the perspective of our world, and are perfectly consistent with the laws of nature of the particular world in question. Now consider  $(A \square C)$  again. Suppose neither A nor C occurs in  $w_{@}$  (the actual world). Suppose also that there is a world  $w_1$ , which is exactly like  $w_{@}$  until just before time  $t$ , when a small miracle happens in  $w_1$  and both A and C occurs. In this case we can label  $w_1$  as more similar to  $w_{@}$  than any non-A-and-non-C-world and thus  $(A \square C)$  holds.<sup>5</sup>

Having explained counterfactual dependence and the similarity relation, I can

---

3 David Lewis, “Counterfactual Dependence and Time’s Arrow,” *Nous* 13 (1979): 455-476.

4 David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Hoboken: Wiley, 1973).

5 Lewis’s full rationale is as follows. Suppose  $w_2$  is exactly like  $w_{@}$  but A still happens. This can only be because the history of  $w_2$  differs from  $w_{@}$ ; and if we assume determinism, this spatio-temporal difference is large as it goes back to the distant past. Suppose  $w_3$  is like  $w_1$  but after A occurs, another miracle takes place so that C does not happen. Lewis believes this approximate spatio-temporal similarity will not last; the difference will get bigger and bigger. Finally, suppose  $w_4$  is like  $w_1$  but after A occurs, a big, widespread miracle occurs such that not only does C not occur, there is also no trace of A—very demanding. Lewis thinks these three cases are all more damning to similarity relations than a world where only a small, localised miracle occurs.

now introduce Lewis' original account of causation as it was laid out in *Causation*. Lewis first distinguishes between events and propositions about events. While Lewis wants to discuss only the causation relation as existing between events, he needs to talk about events in terms of propositions in order to perform his counterfactual analysis.<sup>6</sup> If  $e$  is the death of Socrates in our world, then the proposition  $O(e)$  allows us to examine the different possible manners in which Socrates could have died, which enables us to analyse any counterfactual stories. Now, take two distinct possible events,  $c$  and  $e$ , and let  $O(c)$  be the proposition that  $c$  occurs and  $O(e)$  be the proposition that  $e$  occurs. The proposition  $O(c)$  holds in all worlds in which  $c$  occurs, and only those worlds—same for  $O(e)$  and  $e$ . Therefore,  $e$  depends causally on  $c$  if and only if  $O(e)$  counterfactually depends on  $O(c)$  and  $O(e)$  counterfactually depends on  $O(c)$ . We thus have two conditions that need to be satisfied for *causal dependence*:

(1)  $O(c) \square O(e)$

(2)  $O(c) \square O(e)$ .

If  $c$  and  $e$  both occur, Lewis thinks that (1) automatically holds.<sup>7</sup> The truth of the counterfactual then depends on (2). Let  $c$  be me tilting the cup and  $e$  water being spilt. (2) is satisfied if water would not have been spilt had I not tilted the cup.

But this is only sufficient and not necessary for  $c$  to cause  $e$ . Lewis believes that causation is transitive: if  $c$  causes  $d$ , and  $d$  causes  $e$ , then  $c$  causes  $e$ . If my tilting of the cup leads to water being spilt, which wets the floor, I can be said to have caused the floor to be wet. Lewis calls a sequence of events where there is causal dependence between each event a 'causal chain.' He argues that, in such cases of transitivity,  $c$

---

<sup>6</sup> See Footnote 9 in Lewis, "Causation," 562.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis (1973b) argues for strong centering: if  $w$  is already a  $c$ -and- $e$ -world, then the  $e$ -and- $e$  world most similar to  $w$  is  $w$  itself; and thus if  $c$  and  $e$  both occur,  $O(c) \square O(e)$  is automatically true.

causes *e* if and only if there is a causal chain leading from *c* to *e* (i.e. *c* is the *ancestral* of *e*). This completes Lewis's original account of causation.

### III. The Problem of Absence Causation and Lewis's Solution

An absence is the nonoccurrence of an event. There are three cases of absence causation that are of interest: *omission* (the cause is an absence), *prevention* (the effect is an absence), and *prevention by omission* (both the cause and the effect are absences).<sup>8</sup> In "Postscript D" of *Philosophical Papers*, Lewis focuses on omissions, cases like "Fred's not-taking-precaution caused the accident." Lewis considers three strategies, two of which are opposite strategies: (I) there are events of omission that are *essentially specifiable*; and (II) there are no events of omission. Another is a compromise strategy: (III) there are events of omission that are not essentially specifiable. In what follows, I will explain each of these views and discuss their implications.

(I) considers a case of omission to be constituted by multiple possible events. According to this, Fred's not-taking-precaution is to be explained as Fred's napping-or-fishing-or-eating... and the list goes on. Any possible event where Fred fails to take precaution may count as part of the cause. Lewis thinks (I) makes causation by omission a special case of causation because we normally exclude overly disjunctive events in analysing causation. Whereas (I) entails that omission is a special case of causation, (II) however requires a special class of counterfactuals in analysing cases of omission. This class takes the form "if some event of kind *K* (the omitted kind) had occurred...".<sup>9</sup> (III) considers Fred's not-taking-precaution to be a genuine event but accidentally so. Suppose Fred in fact napped, then his napping *is* the omission. (III) faces the same problem as (II): it requires special counterfactuals. Using the same kind of

---

<sup>8</sup> Although sometimes the term 'omissions' is used to refer to all three cases, I shall stick to the terminology I have introduced to distinguish the three cases.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, *Philosophical Papers*, 192.

counterfactuals in the original account, like “had Fred not napped, he would not have caused the accident” is not viable, because of the many other things that Fred could have done instead of taking precaution which would have caused the accident.

As it is revealed in *Causation as Influence*, Lewis’s preferred solution is (II). Lewis thinks absences are not events but facts—to which negative existential propositions correspond—that can enter into patterns of counterfactual dependence. To allow for this, Lewis concedes that sometimes (i.e. when absences are involved) causation is not a relation, as he believes causal relata must be events. A problem for this approach is that it allows for many cases to be considered causation. On this view, whenever we are alive, there are absences of nerve gas, bullets coming our way, heart failure etc. that keep us alive. Despite this problem, Lewis believes that opponents of absence causation have more burden of proof than proponents of absence causation. I will return to this point in §5.

In *Void and Object*, Lewis further explains how he thinks absence causation can be accounted for in a theory of causation. Lewis first introduces the void – a conceptually possible entity, though impossible in actuality, that is entirely empty, even free of spacetime. If we were in the void (supposing that this is possible), the absence of forces and flows of energy that keep us alive would kill us. The point here is that absences need not be anything that actually exists in order to feature in causation: the void has nothing in it, so no events can happen, but causation still seems to occur in the void. We need not reify the void to ask what would have happened if the void had been there. The relevance of the void will be discussed in §6. Lewis also considers Menzies’s *causal functionalist* account. Menzies argues that we first aim for a *folk theory* of causal relations by finding out the various things that the causal relation does

or “platitudes about causation.”<sup>10</sup> These platitudes then form a postulate of the folk theory which specifies a functional role that the causal relation is thought to occupy.<sup>11</sup>

Lewis thinks that Menzies gets a lot right.<sup>12</sup> Lewis believes that causal functionalism captures the basic kind of causation in our world and in worlds nomologically similar to ours.<sup>13</sup> But because Menzies has not factored in absence causation, Lewis argues that Menzies’ account calls for improvement. First, Lewis calls the occupant of the functional role ‘biff.’ Biff might be something known to physics, or something else—this need not matter for his purposes. Lewis then proposes the following:

- (1) Event *c* directly causes event *e* iff *c* stands to *e* in the relation that occupies the biff-role. For short: iff *c* biffs *e*.
- (2) The absence of any event of kind *C* directly causes event *e* iff, had there been an event *c* of kind *C*, *c* would or might have biffed some event *d* incompatible with event *e*.
- (3) Event *c* directly causes the absence of any event of kind *E* iff *c* biffs some event *d* incompatible with any event of kind *E*.
- (4) The absence of any event of kind *C* directly causes the absence of any event of kind *E* iff, had there been an event *c* of kind *C*, *c* would or might have biffed some event *e* of kind *E*.<sup>14</sup>

(1) is straightforward. If it turns out that biff is some form of energy transfer, then Suzy hitting the bottle with a rock simply means there is energy transferred from Suzy to the bottle in a particular fashion. (2) addresses omissions, counterfactuals

---

10 Peter Menzies, “Probabilistic Causation and the Pre-Emption Problem,” *Mind* 105, no. 417 (1996): 85-117.

11 *Ibid.*, 97-101.

12 Lewis, *Void and Object*, 283.

13 *Ibid.*, 287.

14 *Ibid.*, 285.

like “not-c causes e.” An example is “my failure to brake caused the car to crash.” We can imagine that in the closest possible world, where due to a small miracle (e.g. neuron-misfiring) I did brake (c; an instance of the kind of events *the-braking-of-a-car*), and the car stops (d), which is incompatible with the car crashing (e). Furthermore, (3) addresses preventions, counterfactuals like “c causes not-e.” For example, “the surgeon performing the surgery prevented the patient’s death.” Here, the surgeon’s performance of the surgery (c) biffs the improvement in the patients’ physical conditions (d), which is incompatible with the patient dying (e; of the kind of events *a-person-dying*). Finally, (4) addresses prevention by omission, counterfactuals like “not-c causes not-e.” For example, “Suzy’s not-throwing-the-rock caused the bottle to not break.” We can imagine a closest possible world where due to a small miracle Suzy did throw the rock (c; of the kind of events *throwing-of-a-rock*), and this biffed the bottle to shatter (e; of the kind of events *a-bottle-shattering*).

#### IV. Evaluating the Options for Incorporating Absences

I make two points in this section. The first point is that Lewis is right in saying that (II) is superior to (I) or (III), that is, treating absences as facts is better than treating them as events, either essentially specifiable or not. The second point is that Lewis’s new approach nonetheless faces problems. To explain the first point, consider (I) which involves an understanding of events that conflicts with Lewis’s definition of events as a class of spatio-temporal regions.<sup>15</sup> What class of spatio-temporal regions is Fred’s napping-or-eating-or-fishing-or...? It seems that we are being very permissive here—far more permissive than we would like. Every French citizen’s not-taking-caution may count as a cause of the accident. This permissiveness also allows for strange things to factor into causal claims. For example, “James Bond’s not-taking-precaution

---

<sup>15</sup> David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1986).

causes the accident.” But James Bond is fictional. He does not actually exist.

Now consider (III). Here we no longer have a problem for the concept of events, but we also do not have counterfactual dependence. For example, we cannot say that Fred’s napping caused the accident without already having found out that Fred did in fact nap. But if we need to establish a causal claim in a post-hoc way like this, then we face a problem of indeterminacy. Only after finding out that Fred napped can we conclude that Fred caused the accident. We want to be able to say that Fred caused the accident *just* from the fact that Fred did not take precaution. Imagine a case where Fred went missing, perhaps from being too ashamed for having caused the accident, but we do not know what Fred did or did not do (there is no video evidence), then it seems that we are forced to conclude that we do not know who or what caused the accident. This is problematic because even if Fred went missing, we can still reasonably say that Fred caused the accident by not taking precaution.

The lesson from the above is that we face dilemmas if we want to say that absences are events. We are either too inclusive about events (I) or indeterminate about causal claims (III). Either we have a questionable account of events (I) or counterfactual dependence does not hold (III). Now consider (II), which explains absence causation in terms of facts. (II) builds on the advantage that facts like Fred’s not-taking-precaution can obtain without needing to be essentially nor accidentally specified (thus leading to a kind of causation we might call “factual causation”). One way that Lewis suggests this might work is to think of a fact as something that supervenes on a pattern of events with various causes.<sup>16</sup> Lewis gives the example of Xanthippe becoming a widow, a fact that supervenes on a pattern of events, which is caused by the causes of Socrates’ death and the causes of her marriage to Socrates. By explaining absences in terms of facts, then, (II) avoids the dilemmas facing (I) and (III).

---

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, *Philosophical Papers*, 189.

Nonetheless, Lewis' new approach has disadvantages compared to his original account. Consider Lewis's original account. It is parsimonious: it only needs two conditions for causation (plus an *ancestral* condition for causal chains), and it is based purely on counterfactual dependence. This is consistent with Lewis's emphasis on economy or simplicity as an important theoretical virtue.<sup>17</sup> Compare this to Lewis's new account, which has four conditions for four different cases of causation, of which only conditions (2) and (4) involve counterfactual dependence (and a special class of counterfactual dependence involving 'the absence of any event of kind C...'). What is more, the four conditions only cover *direct* cases of causation despite Lewis' remark that there can also be *indirect* cases of causation involving a causal chain of events or absences.<sup>18</sup> An example is double prevention, when an absence prevents another absence, which would have prevented c from causing e (an example is offered in §6). Lewis has not provided a condition that would account for this kind of indirect cases. I provide a plausible candidate to formalise Lewis's point here:

(5) An event c (or the absence of any event of kind C) indirectly causes event e (or the absence of any event of kind E) iff there are one or more events (or absences of events of kinds F, G, H...) between c and e such that, each preceding event or absence in the causal chain causes the next in the manner described in either one of conditions (1)-(4).

We thus now have (at least) five conditions which demonstrates the complexity of Lewis' new approach.

Another problem arises from the fact that Lewis now breaks from his original

---

<sup>17</sup> Lewis, *Plurality of Worlds*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis, *Void and Object*, 285.

account by allowing for the possibility of what Ned Hall calls causation as ‘production,’ or the idea that *c* may cause *e* by producing or bringing about *e*.<sup>19</sup> This would be considered by Hall as a fundamentally different approach to Lewis’ original account where he sought to explain causation only in terms of counterfactual dependence. This is due to Lewis’ acceptance of Menzies’ causal functionalism, which I believe faces two difficulties. First, it seems to assume that science can eventually reveal some fundamental physical mechanism that would occupy the functional role of what we call ‘causation.’ Second, it seems to assume that all the folk intuitions surrounding causation can be discovered exhaustively, then analysed and amalgamated together coherently to give us a *postulate* of the folk theory. Both assumptions are questionable at least without further argument. Furthermore, if we cannot figure out what *biff* is, then the other conditions in the new account do not work, since they all supervene on (1), the *biff*-condition. This all suggests that Lewis’s new account depends on principles that are far less tenable than the principle underlying his original account, which relies only on counterfactual dependence—a logical relation commonly deemed to be strong.

## V. Shifting the Burden of Proof

Given the difficulties facing the attempts to account for absence causation, one might already wonder why absences need to be accounted for in an account of causation. This section attempts to shift the burden of proof to defenders of absence causation by arguing that defenders must pick between one of two problems facing the supposed cases of absence causation. As mentioned in §3, Lewis believes opponents of absence causation have more burden of proof than its defenders. First, Lewis thinks that cases of absence causation are compelling, and that merely saying that

---

19 Ned Hall, “Two Concepts of Causation,” *Philosophy Compass* 2, no. 3 (2004): 508-516.

absences do not play a role in causation serves as a *reductio* against itself.<sup>20</sup> Curiously, Lewis has not attempted to argue for or provide much support for this claim. He finds the intuitions in support of absence causation undeniable. Second, Lewis rejects the challenge raised against accommodating absences causation on the grounds that it would lead to an implausibly high number of cases being counted as causation (call this the ‘Problem of Overinclusiveness’ or PO).<sup>21</sup> Lewis thinks that this challenge is merely based on pragmatics, such as how we care about relevance in ordinary speech, so we find it strange to utter statements like “the lack of presence of nerve gas causes me to stay alive.”

Lewis does not elaborate on why relying on pragmatics undermines PO. I suspect Lewis, being a naturalist, has something like this in mind: the metaphysical notion of causation is natural and objective; but conversational norms do not track such natural and objective truths, as they are (depending on your stance) socially-constructed, mind-dependent, or at any rate developed from dynamics of cultural adaptation that are not geared towards tracking such truths.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, intuitions based on conversational norms should not be invoked to reject absence causation and so PO fails. But if this is right, then Lewis may be shooting himself in the foot. Because, as I now argue, Lewis’s appeal to the compelling nature of absence causation similarly depends on intuitions irrelevant to the metaphysical notion of causation.<sup>23</sup>

Consider the following cases:

- (1) Fred the performer’s not-taking-precaution caused a fire (modified from Lewis).
- (2) Tim was a removalist sued by his client for not taking precaution at work

---

20 Lewis, *Void and Object*, 281.

21 Lewis, *Causation as Influence*, 101.

22 Daniel Nolan, *David Lewis* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2005), 10.

23 By a ‘naturalist’ I mean in the broad sense someone who believes that in philosophical theorising, we should be respectful of the sciences—especially the natural sciences—and as a result we should try our best to ensure that philosophical theories are not ignorant of or in conflict with the best scientific theories (unless there are compelling reasons otherwise).

and breaking a precious artwork.

(3) Michael the technician's mistake caused the train to not arrive at 3pm.

When presented with such cases, people are tempted to say that Fred's and Tim's inactions caused the accidents, and that Michael's action caused the absence of the train. Why? I argue that our intuitions on causality in such cases are driven by normative assumptions; we find the people in scenarios (1)-(3) morally responsible for their actions and inactions because they have special duties to ensure that these particular accidents do not occur.<sup>24</sup> The focus on Fred's particular causal role rather than, say, the lack of rain during Fred's performance, allows us to point to Fred as being responsible for the fire. This explanation, I believe, is plausible because it captures how human societies operate: moral norms allow us to hold people accountable for their (in)actions, and we use notions of causation to determine where the responsibility lies.

I have pointed out that our causal judgements can be influenced or primed by moral norms, a point similar to the point raised by Lewis in relation to conversational norms. My explanation here is not just plausible: there is also empirical evidence for the phenomenon that causal attribution is tied up with intuitions of moral responsibility.<sup>25</sup> Now, if Lewis is correct and conversational norms should not affect how we determine causation in a metaphysical sense, should moral norms be able to do so? I doubt that we have any more reason to rely on moral norms in guiding our causal judgements than we have with conversational reasons. To make this point, consider certain determinists who argue that individuals should never be held morally responsible for their (in)actions. Roughly, they believe that this is due to the fact that our (in)

---

24 Such duties can be in fact legal as well as moral, though due to a lack of space I will not spell out the nuances between the different forms of normativity here.

25 Joshua Knobe and Ben Fraser, "Causal Judgment and Moral Judgment: Two Experiments," *Moral Psychology* 2 (2008): 441-8.

actions are ultimately the result of genetic and environmental influences beyond our control.<sup>26</sup> If people accept and internalise such views, it is plausible that they would no longer consider Fred, Tim, or Michael responsible; they might instead say something like ‘their upbringing is what caused the accidents.’

Here it is clear that metaphysicians in search of an objective analysis of causation would not want their account to be vulnerable to changes in our normative beliefs, which, like conversational norms, do not seem to be able to capture the natural and objective metaphysical truths about causation (if there are any). Hence, if whether or not we take absence-causation claims to be intuitive depends on the particular normative assumptions associated with such claims, then this suggests that our intuitions about the existence of absence causation are misguided or ungrounded. I call this the ‘Problem of Normativity,’ or PN.<sup>27</sup>

From the above, Lewis’s response to PO seems to be self-defeating. If we want to rule out considerations of conversational norms from causation, then too should we rule out normative assumptions regarding moral and legal responsibility. But if we do so, many supposed cases of absence causation no longer seem intuitive, and thus Lewis’ appeal to the compelling nature of absence causation is called into question. Moreover, there is a dilemma here: we can either reject PO by appealing to pragmatics, as Lewis does, and in so doing find ourselves needing to address PN. Or, we can avoid PN by not appealing to pragmatics. But if we do so, how can defenders of absence causation reply to the charge that an account of causation involving absences is overly inclusive? Lewis has not pointed out an alternative way to do this. The result from this discussion is thus that defenders of absence causation have the burden of

---

26 Gregg Caruso, *Exploring the Illusion of Free Will and Moral Responsibility* (Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2013).

27 It may also be called a normative debunking argument of absence causation, for it aims to challenge intuitions in favour of absence causation by attempting to show that they rely on normative assumptions.

proof to either counter PO, counter PN, or provide reasons to argue that we do not have to choose between them.

## **VI. Addressing an Objection**

A possible objection is that my argument is cherry-picking. My opponent may claim: “even if you are right, you have not addressed intuitions in favour of absence causation that are not driven by normative assumptions.” My opponent may proceed to present the following cases.

(A) The lack of external physical forces causes one to die in the void (from Lewis).

(B) The absences of deadly things are keeping us alive (from Lewis).

(C) The rain prevented the drought.

(D) Dad hits the cue ball towards the red ball. Little Johnny, who is mischievous, hits the green ball towards the cue ball to stop it mid-way. Dad, seeing this, hits the yellow ball to stop the green ball. The cue ball, unaffected, hits the red ball and causes it to go in the hole.

I believe that PO still applies in these cases. As mentioned, the absences of nerve gas, bullets coming our way, heart failure and so forth can all be said to keep me alive. Similarly, the lack of a malfunctioning irrigation system, the work by the farmer, the presence of oxygen and so forth can all be said to have prevented the drought. Furthermore, the lack of a powerful fan above the billiard ball table, the table's lack of splitting in half, or the absence of a merciful mom that lets Johnny have his way can all be said to be causes in the double-prevention case. Therefore, insofar as we are including absences as causes, we still face PO here: many absences can cause something (B); an absence can be caused by many things (C); and an indirect case of

causation may have many absences in its causal chain (D).

One might still insist that, in the case of (A), PO does not apply to the void because the void is designed to only allow for the lack of external physical forces to cause the person's death—there could not have been anything else that causes my death in the void.<sup>28</sup> I am sceptical about this. Even just considering the absences of external physical forces that would 'cause' me to die in the void, there can be multiple such absences: the lack of oxygen, the lack of a life-sustaining level of air pressure, the lack of life-sustaining temperature and so forth. However, even if we set this point aside, my objector's argument here still casts doubt on the applicability of void-like scenarios as counterexamples to PO. We can see such examples in the real world perhaps only in highly-controlled physics experiments, for example experiments involving a Large Hadron Collider, for they are designed to exclude any confounds in order to pick out one-to-one causation. Therefore, I do not think it suffices for defenders of absence causation to make their case by appealing to a very limited, highly-controlled set of circumstances. For metaphysicians to accept the need to account for absences in an account of causation, given all the problems explained in §4 and the dilemma introduced in §5, they must give us a more convincing reason than that.

## VII. Concluding Remark

In this essay, I have argued that the options that Lewis considers to account for absences in an account of causation, including Lewis's preferred option, all face problems. I have also attempted to shift the burden of proof to defenders of absence causation by presenting a dilemma to them, namely that they have to choose be-

---

28 Although, even just considering the absences of external physical forces that 'cause' me to die here, there can be multiple such absences: the lack of oxygen, the lack of a life-sustaining level of air pressure, the lack of life-sustaining temperature, etc.

tween the Problem of Normativity or the Problem of Overinclusiveness. I hereby offer a concluding remark. Lewis treats causation as natural and objective—independent of our normative assumptions. But Lewis also believes in the importance of respecting intuitions in metaphysics:

*“...theoretical conservatism is the only sensible policy for theorists of limited powers... Part of this conservatism is reluctance to accept theories that fly in the face of common sense.”<sup>29</sup>*

These two commitments give rise to an element of awkwardness for a *metaphysical* analysis of causation. Lewis wants to avoid ‘invidious discrimination’ in metaphysics.<sup>30</sup> But people regularly commit such discrimination by focusing on (in)actions that entail moral or legal responsibility in supposed cases of absence causation. As I have shown, if we reject such discrimination, we may inadvertently risk “flying in the face of common sense” in other cases. Hence, there is a tension between Lewis’s two commitments. This kind of awkwardness is what leads Hitchcock (2007), in another context, to suggest that we dispense with the metaphysical notion of causation and only hold onto the *scientific* and *folk* concepts. The scientific concept avoids the awkwardness by focusing on providing accounts of causation that have utility for empirical investigations, and thus is not concerned with accounting for folk intuitions. The folk concept avoids the awkwardness by focusing on the ways in which people make causal attributions—even when they are appealing to the normative relevance of an (in)action—and thus makes no restrictions on causation as natural and objective. While I do not go as far as Hitchcock, the tension between Lewis’s two commitments, as revealed by

---

<sup>29</sup> Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, 134.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis, *Causation*, 559.

this essay in the case of absence causation, does shed light on the awkwardness of a metaphysical notion of causation, which metaphysicians will need to address in their pursuit of a metaphysical account of causation.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Caruso, Gregg. *Exploring the Illusion of Free Will and Moral Responsibility*. Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2013.
- Hall, Ned. "Two Concepts of Causation." In *Causation and Counterfactuals*, edited by Collins, Hall and L. A. Paul, 225-276. Boston: MIT Press, 2004.
- Hitchcock, Christopher. "Three Concepts of Causation." *Philosophy Compass* 2, no. 3 (2007): 508-516.
- Knobe, Joshua and Ben Fraser. "Causal Judgment and Moral Judgment: Two Experiments." *Moral Psychology* 2 (2008): 441-8.
- Lewis, David. "Causation." *The Journal of Philosophy* 70, no. 17 (2004): 556-567.
- Lewis, David. *Counterfactuals*. Hoboken: Blackwell, 1973.
- Lewis, David. "Counterfactual Dependence and Time's Arrow." *Noûs* 13 (1979): 455-476.
- Lewis, David. *Philosophical Papers Volume II*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Lewis, David. *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1986.
- Lewis, David. "Causation as Influence." In *Causation and Counterfactuals*, edited by Collins, Hall and L. A. Paul, 75-106. Boston: MIT Press, 2004.
- Lewis, David. "Void and Object." In *Causation and Counterfactuals*, edited by Collins, Hall and L. A. Paul, 277-290. Boston: MIT Press, 2004.
- Menzies, Peter. "Probabilistic Causation and the Pre-Emption Problem." *Mind* 105, no. 417 (1996): 85-117.
- Nolan, Daniel. *David Lewis*. Stocksfield: Acumen, 2005.