

PHIL 4603: Metaphysics
Prof. Funkhouser
Davidson, "Causal Relations"

- Question: "What is the logical form of singular causal statements like: 'The flood caused the famine' ..."? (428)

I.

- Davidson thinks that causes are events, rather than something corresponding to descriptions of events. These events are *particulars*. Consider, for example, the following passage:

Take one of Mill's examples: some man, say Smith, dies, and the cause of his death is said to be that his foot slipped in climbing a ladder. Mill would say we have not given the whole cause, since having a foot slip in climbing a ladder is not always followed by death. What we were after, however, was not the cause of death in general but the cause of Smith's death: does it make sense to ask under what conditions Smith's death invariably follows?" (428–429)

Davidson is pointing out that there is something off about treating *particular* causes as providing necessary or sufficient conditions for their effects. Again, notice Davidson's emphasis on the particularity of causes and effects, when discussing the example introduced by Mackie:

Suppose the experts know what they are said to; how does this bear on the question whether the short circuit was a necessary condition of this particular fire? For a short circuit elsewhere could not have caused *this* fire, nor could the overturning of a lighted oil stove. (429)

- Davidson will argue against the view that causes are sentence-like (facts).
- Davidson accepts the "principle of extensional substitution":

If Smith's death was caused by the fall from the ladder and Smith was the first man to land on the moon, then the fall from the ladder was the cause of the death of the first man to land on

the moon. And if the fact that there was a fire in Jones's house caused it to be the case that the pig was roasted, and Jones's house is the oldest building on Elm Street, then the fact that there was a fire in the oldest building on Elm Street caused it to be the case that the pig was roasted. (430)

II.

- Going back to (1) and (2), we see that (1) conveys a singularity (“the short circuit” and “the fire”) that is not conveyed by (2). So, Davidson claims:

Evidently (1) and (2) do not have the same logical form. If we think in terms of standard notations for first-order languages, it is (1) that more or less wears its form on its face; (2), like many existentially quantified sentences, does not (witness ‘Somebody loves somebody’). The relation between (1) and (2) remains obvious and close: (1) entails (2), but not conversely. (431)

III.

- Davidson warns that we must carefully distinguish between events and the descriptions under which we consider these events. We might describe an event in such a way that it sounds as if it was not sufficient for the effect, when in fact it was sufficient. For example:

“The cause of this match's lighting is that it was struck — Yes, but that was only *part* of the cause; it had to be a dry match, there had to be adequate oxygen in the atmosphere, it had to be struck hard enough, etc.” We ought now to appreciate that the “Yes, but” comment does not have the force we thought. It cannot be that the striking of this match was only part of the cause, for this match was in fact dry, in adequate oxygen, and the striking was hard enough. (431)

The description of this event did not list causally sufficient conditions, but the event so described was nevertheless causally sufficient for the effect.

- Davidson notes that the more complete we describe a cause, the more likely it will appear to be sufficient but the less likely it will appear to be necessary.

- But what is the relation between causal laws and singular causal statements?

If this is correct, it does not follow that we must be able to dredge up a law if we know a singular causal statement to be true; all that follows is that we know there must be a covering law. And very often, I think, our justification for accepting a singular causal statement is that we have reason to believe an appropriate causal law exists, though we do not know what it is. (433)

IV.

- In the second to last paragraph, Davidson distinguishes *causation* from *causal explanation*. The latter relates statements, whereas the former relates events.