

Causal Theories of Reference

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CAUSAL THEORIES OF REFERENCE *

KIM is certainly right about one thing: causal theories are everywhere. They are particularly prevalent in the philosophy of mind. One finds causal theories of perception, knowledge, reference, meaning, belief, and emotion. Since philosophers can't seem to agree about what causation is, Kim thinks it is time we threw away this analytical crutch. He sees little progress in the replacement of one mystery by another.

I think such impatience betrays a misunderstanding of what motivates a causal theory in epistemology, the philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of language. Philosophers are attracted to a causal theory, not because this relation is well understood, not because there is a consensus about its proper analysis, but because, whatever else it is, it is a genuine relation that characterizes much of what goes on in our material world. That is, the relation is not itself one that is infected with the virus of mentality. It holds between the moon and the tides, flying bricks and broken windows, photon absorption and neuronal discharges. As such this relation qualifies as a tool in the attempt to render a *naturalistic* account of such peculiarly mental phenomena as belief, knowledge, intention, and perception. Even if we can't say exactly what causality is, even if there is no agreement about its proper analysis, there is nothing to prevent our use of this notion as an important analytical device in the philosophy of mind. For insofar as mental states, activities, and attitudes can be understood in causal terms, our conviction that the causal relation is not unique to mental phenomena yields the naturalist's conclusion that there is nothing unique about the mind. Even if we cannot say what matter is, efforts to show that the mind is material are not without philosophical significance.

Despite its alleged opacity, Kim discerns enough of the central features of the causal relation to catalog some of the difficulties in using it to analyze what he calls "intentional" phenomena. For example, if *A* is the cause of *B*, and *B* the cause of *C*, then both *A* and *B* may be said to be the cause of *C*. *A* is a remote cause, *B* a proximal cause. Yet, *C* may be a state that takes only *B* as its "object." *C* is *of* or *about* *B*, not *A*. Hence, the causal relation doesn't suffice to determine the intentional or referential character

* Abstract of a paper to be delivered in an APA symposium on Perception, December 29, 1977, commenting on a paper by Jaegwon Kim; see this JOURNAL, this issue, 606-620.

of such attitudes as perception and knowledge that have an object. Kim arrives at the harsh conclusion that the causal relation is incapable of performing the task required of it by causal theories. According to Kim, causal theories of perception, knowledge, and reference attempt to explain intentionality via causality. But in this attempt they are unsuccessful. The intentionality of intentional relations does not consist in some form of causal connection.

I was initially puzzled by this claim. What puzzled me was why Kim thought anyone would *try* to analyze intentionality in terms of a genuine relation like causality. It turns out that, despite his allusion to Brentano, Kim is not really talking about intentional attitudes at all—at least not as these (following Brentano) are commonly understood in epistemology and the philosophy of mind. For in these studies the paradigm of an intentional “relation” is an attitude such as *desire* in which the direct object of the verb need not refer to anything for one to stand to it in the “relation” expressed by the verb. So, for example, one can want, desire, hope for, and seek a cure for cancer even though a cure does not now, and perhaps never will, exist. One can believe in things that don’t exist and imagine exploits that will never materialize. If one thinks of a genuine relation as one that requires the existence of its relata, then wanting, desiring, seeking, hoping, believing, and imagining are not really relations at all, at least not relations between the subject and what he is said to want, believe in, or seek. Causality, however, *is* a genuine relation. I can believe there is a bug in my soup, or be afraid that this is so, without there actually being a bug in my soup; but nothing can *cause* there to be a bug in my soup, or be the *effect* of this state of affairs, unless there really is a bug in my soup. For this reason alone causality seems to be a very unlikely candidate for the analysis of such intentional attitudes. Quite the contrary. Causality is usually invoked to explain why some of our mental attitudes (knowledge, perception), unlike the fully intentional attitudes, *require* the existence of their objects. They require the existence of their objects because they characterize in different ways our *causal* relationship with objects.

But this is (at best) a terminological point. Kim doesn’t mean this when he talks about intentional relations. He means, simply, some attitude or state that involves a reference to another object where the reference in question is understood as a genuine relation requiring the existence of the object to which ostensible reference is made. Unlike desire and hope, the object of Kim’s intentional states cannot merely have what Brentano calls “intentional in-

existence." And what Kim wants to show about this type of reference is that it cannot be analyzed in causal terms. Instead, we are given to understand that the object of our perceptual and cognitive encounters is determined by something else, something he calls *direct cognitive contact*. Just what it means to be in direct cognitive contact with an object is left unclear, but it is the kind of thing Russell had in mind when he spoke of acquaintance and which is most clearly illustrated (in the case of physical objects) by our direct perception of tables, tomatoes, and people.

This appears to be a very small circle. Perception and knowledge are intentional attitudes. Intentionality is primarily a matter of reference (there is some object we see, some object we know something about). Reference is determined by the relation of direct cognitive contact. And direct cognitive contact (with objects) is established in perception. So perception and knowledge require the kind of cognitive contact we have in perception.

I am not sure this charge of circularity can be made to stick. I don't really care. For it seems to me that Kim's primary interest is not in articulating a full-dress alternative to a causal theory of reference (and, hence, a causal theory of perception and knowledge), but in exhibiting the *need* for some alternative. The fact that his own sketchy analysis is vague, and the less vague it becomes the more circular it sounds, is less important than his contention that causal theories are inadequate and that something is needed to replace them. Evaluated in terms of this limited objective, I think Kim's efforts are reasonably successful: causal conditions, as usually formulated, are just too broad to do any real work in most analyses. Furthermore, I agree with him that whatever further conditions are imposed on a simple causal condition will end up doing most of the work and the causal condition itself will fade, if not out of the picture (as Kim asserts), at least into the background.

Consider a typical example. Someone rings my doorbell. I hear the bell ring but not the button being pushed. Since both events (the depression of the button and the ringing of the bell) are causally responsible, in their own way, for my auditory experience, a simple causal theory is incapable of explaining why I hear the bell ringing but not the button being pushed. More often than not, one is told that there is an "appropriate" causal relation between the bell's ringing and the consequent auditory experience, but the relation between the button's being pushed and this auditory experience, though causal, is not "appropriate." It is the appropriate-

ness of the causal relation that makes the ringing bell the object of the auditory experience (what it is I hear) and not the movement of the button. Obviously, in such cases the causal condition is doing little or no work in picking out the perceptual object. The burden is being carried by whatever makes the causal relation "appropriate."

Still, although I agree with Kim that causal conditions are incapable of doing everything they are typically asked to do, I think he seriously underestimates how much they really do accomplish and, as a result, fails to appreciate how difficult it is to find a satisfactory replacement for them. His own attempt to replace causal connections with cognitive relations is a case in point. His cognitive relation (direct cognitive contact) not only fails to do the job assigned to it, it simultaneously collapses an important distinction (between seeing and knowing) that we must preserve if we are to make sense of man's total cognitive resources.

Each of these points can be illustrated by a single example. Humpty and Dumpty are twins. Dumpty is out of town and I see Humpty strolling in the park. What makes it true to say that I see Humpty, not Dumpty? Causal theorists will answer that it is Humpty, not Dumpty, that is reflecting light into my visual receptors. It is Humpty, not Dumpty, that is causally responsible for (certain key aspects of) my present visual experience, and it is this fact that makes Humpty the object of the perceptual relation. Kim is prepared to accept the causal story, but he is anxious to deny that it is this that *makes* Humpty the person I see. He insists that what makes Humpty the object of the perceptual relation is the fact that I stand in direct cognitive contact with Humpty, not Dumpty. This sounds true enough, but what does it amount to? If Kim simply means that I *perceive* (see) Humpty, not Dumpty, then this is no analysis at all. If he means that I *know* something about Humpty that I don't know about Dumpty (e.g., that he is strolling in the park), we are left with the question: what makes this piece of knowledge *about Humpty* rather than Dumpty? I certainly needn't know *that it is Humpty* (rather than Dumpty) strolling in the park to see Humpty strolling in the park. If Kim replies by saying that this piece of knowledge must be about Humpty, not Dumpty, because the latter is *not* strolling in the park (he is climbing mountains in Colorado), he is opting for a satisfaction theory of reference that he finds so obviously inadequate. For even if Dumpty is strolling in the park (obscured from my view by a tree), this hasn't the slightest tendency to show that

I see him. The things I know about what I see can be true of many things I do not see. So what it is I know about what I see cannot determine what it is that I see.

The fact is that I don't have to know anything about Humpty to see him, certainly nothing that would distinguish him from a variety of other possible candidates for perceptual object (e.g., Dumpty). I can even see Humpty under conditions (e.g., 200 yards at dusk) when he looks the same as any other person (not just Dumpty). What, then, is the force of the claim that it is my *cognitive* contact with Humpty that makes *him* the person I see? Either Kim must deny that I am in direct cognitive contact with Humpty under these adverse conditions, thus denying that I see him, or he must eliminate the *epistemic* implications of being in direct cognitive contact with something. Either option is disastrous for a *cognitive* theory of reference.

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AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL ASSOCIATION
EASTERN DIVISION

Abstracts of Colloquium Papers to be read at the
Seventy-fourth Annual Meeting

I. ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHY

ARISTOTLE ON THE EXISTENTIAL IMPORT OF SINGULAR SENTENCES

Aristotle is sometimes held to the thesis (T1) that singular affirmative sentences imply the existence of a bearer for the grammatical subject of the sentence. Thus the truth of "Socrates is sick" requires that something exist that is identical with Socrates. Attribution of T1 to Aristotle is typically justified by appeal to *Categories* 13b27-33, which looks to contain a straightforward statement of the thesis. Unfortunately, T1's status becomes problematic in light of *On Interpretation* 21a24-28, for here Aristotle seems to deny T1 explicitly. This, at least, is the consensus among his commentators. We are thus faced with a serious inconsistency in Aristotle's account of singular sentences, an inconsistency most interpreters are content merely to mention if they notice it at all. In this paper I suggest a reconciliation between the troublesome passages.

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