

Things and Causes

If you say that every event has a cause, you better have a story to tell justifying whatever principle of individuation you're using to slice out some part of the world and call it an event. Not *everything* is an event, just as not every "thing" is a thing. Or else everything is a thing and therefore nothing is anything. Probably most problems in the history of philosophy come down to what things are things (alternatively, what a thing is).

Consider the set of things, call it S_0 . For the moment I'm making no assumption about its cardinality, though not much is lost by taking it to be finite. Unless S_0 is a proper class, in which case we're in trouble from the getgo. We define, by transfinite recursion, a new set of things. Let $S_{s(\alpha)} := S_\alpha \cup \{S_\alpha\}$ where $s(\alpha)$ denotes the successor ordinal, and when α is a limit, $S_\alpha := \bigcup_{\beta < \alpha} S_\beta$. Perhaps 'define' isn't the right word because engineers are more equipped than mathematicians to hammer out what's involved in these successive (or limit) operations. If there's a board here and a leg there, we get a table by putting them together. Of course, that might already be a thing in S_0 , in which case 'define' is a perfectly fine word to use. A preliminary definition: a thing is a thing if it belongs to one of these sets of things. Natural language isn't bound by the same laws that mathematics is, so we could in fact take the whole tamale (all the way up the ordinals) to itself be a thing (perhaps at this point, we may want to call it a superthing). Hence why natural language, and not mathematics, can sometimes give birth to insanities ('language goes on holiday').

Back to causality. Skepticism about causality has nothing to do with quantum phenomena, nor does it have to do with recognizing or admitting our intimidation by epistemological limits. It is an attitude about how language works: a cause is what with our *word* 'cause' we use to describe some circumscribed region of the world which we perceive to be (or say is) related, in some well enough understood sense, to some other circumscribed region of the world, to which we attach the word 'effect'. An event is not a thing; it's a linguistic tool which draws boundaries according to location or time or whathaveyou. I include 'whathaveyou' to extricate one from the possible temptation of thinking that space and time are *fundamentally* basic and therefore that out of which it might make sense to individuate absolutely events as things. Time and space are no more basic than action or events, or for that matter "things". Talking about brute fact has the unfortunate appearance of saying the opposite of what we want it to: things *are* basic, in that we don't need something *else* to understand (talk about) them, but that is a feature of our language, life, or psychology, not of the things in "themselves"!

The reason the scientific method is a joke (as a metaphysical thesis) is that you can't enumerate all the possible things which *might* contribute to the way something is and hold them constant. Instead: you consider the things you believe to be relevant, and hold or vary *them* (as the [rest of the] universe swirls about), and you have no clue how exhaustive this list is.¹ Our skepticism isn't meant as or intended to be obscurantist, and for that reason 'skepticism' isn't the most accurate term describing it. The appellation is a remnant of history and an antiquated illustration of the extent to which metaphysics has infiltrated, hijacked, and infected the way that we think. We avert our gaze from and resist the mesmerizing sparkle of the hitherto ungrounded notion that causality can everywhere be talked about linearly and sequentially. As opposed to e.g. 'everything hangs together with everything' (or 'some subset of everything hangs together with some other subset of everything with some mesh which could maybe be represented in some convoluted directed graph theoretic manner').

The framework to which you subject your musings of how causality in general operates is an apriori assumption about something you got knowledge of only through experience and human interaction. When a Kant says to us that pre-experiential (and *a fortiori*, pre-social) mental structures form (ground) our understanding of the world, we say: all thought you have happens to in fact be post-experiential and post-social (a borderline banal observation); how are you going to sift through in the order of causality what came from experience (from language), and what did not? He may say 'how are you going to provide a(n objective and definitive) valuation (w.r.t. truth, ethics, etc.) for your experience?' For each worldview there is a question *it* cannot answer. I guess the question you have to ask yourself is which ones you can and can not handle not answering.

¹This point is drawn out nicely in an essay by Shanker, 'A Picture Held me Captive', published in *Wittgenstein at Work: Method in the Philosophical Investigations*.