
Questions about Causes

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Political scientists talk about “causes” all the time.¹ Yet they have long and deep disagreements about what it means to call something a cause and whether political science accounts should aim to explain causally at all. People (including political scientists) also talk about causes in everyday contexts, and it is to this everyday talk that technical political science understandings of causation are ultimately tethered. In this essay, I ask: “What is it that people do when they ask and answer questions about the causes of human action in everyday contexts?” in order to explore a few difficulties that political scientists have encountered in thinking about causation.

Note that I refrain from examining how we talk about causation in the non-human world (e.g., questions like “What caused the Big Bang?”). People may be doing different things when they ask about the causes of human action on the one hand and non-human occurrences on the other, and a comparison of the two is beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that talk about the causes of human action is not parasitic, at least historically, on talk about causation in the non-human world. Causal talk in both English and Latin (from which the English-language word “cause” derives) was, from the beginning, directed at explaining human action.

Ordinary and Scientific Languages

In positing a relationship between ordinary and scientific languages that is worthy of investigation, I am self-consciously taking a position at odds with a fairly common view articulated here by Sartori: “Whatever else ‘science’ may be, its necessary, preliminary condition resides in the formulation of a *special and specialized language*...whose distinctive characterist[c] is precisely to correct the defects of ordinary language” (1984: 57–58). By this view, it is misguided to investigate connections between ordinary and technical uses of a term, because scientifically reconstructed technical terms have been intentionally created to depart from ordinary use.

I do not think, however, that reconstructive efforts ever fully succeed. Contestation and confusion still surround the meaning of many reconstructed political terms. Despite countless efforts at reconstruction, there is still little consensus among political scientists and philosophers, for instance, about what power, freedom, politics, or democracy “really are,” or how the divergent meanings attached to these terms fit together. Furthermore, and relatedly, reconstructed terms are susceptible to what Keller (1992: 10) calls “slippage.” Slippage occurs when the meaning of a term shifts back and forth between its technical (i.e., reconstructed) and ordinary meanings. An example of slippage can be found in Skocpol’s use of “social revolutions” in *States and Social Revolutions*. Her reconstructed definition of this term is as follows: “Social revolutions are rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures; and they are accompanied and are in part carried through by class-based revolts from below” (1979: 4). Yet, as Motyl explains, Skocpol does not adhere consistently to this definition, and sometimes draws instead upon ordinary meanings of “revolution.”

At times [social revolution] connotes transformations or, more simply perhaps, change; at other times, it clearly is meant to stand for some notion of popular upheaval; at still other times, Skocpol suggests that revolutions and crises are the same, that is to say, that revolutions are merely enormous problems and challenges. (1992: 103)

Skocpol’s reconstructive efforts, in short, do not allow her to break free from ordinary use.

The larger point is that reconstructed terms remain bound to the ordinary terms from which they are derived. Ryle explains how this connection holds for elemental words like “cause”:

The concepts of *cause, evidence, knowledge, mistake, ought, can*, etc., are not the prerequisites of any particular group of people. We employ them before we begin to develop or follow special theories; and we could not follow or develop such theories unless we could already employ these concepts. (1953: 170–171)

Technical ways of talking about causes, Ryle is right to argue, are premised on ordinary ways. Consequently, we may gain insight into some of the difficulties political scientists have encountered in thinking about “cause” by taking a careful look at ordinary uses of this word.

Cause Questions

What is it, then, that we do when we ask and answer questions about the causes of human action in ordinary contexts? As a starting point, consider the following two “what caused person X to” questions:

- (A) What caused Henrietta to arrive late?
- (B) What caused Henrietta to arrive on time?

Assuming that Henrietta usually arrives on time, question A sounds natural and correct in a way that question B does not. It would sound odd to ask what caused Henrietta to arrive on time if she in fact usually arrives on time. Indeed, we normally ask “what caused person X to” questions when the person about whom we are asking *deviates* from (rather than continues on) some normal, habitual, or expected course of action for that person or for people in general.² All the questions below, for this reason, sound natural to the ear:

- What caused the contractor to fall from the roof?
- What caused Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation?
- What caused the young singer to take her own life?
- What caused the pastor to say such a rude thing?

Peters (1958: 10) characterizes questions of this type as “cases of lapses from action or failure to act...when people as it were

get it wrong.” While some “what caused” questions do imply that someone got something wrong—failing to prevent oneself from falling from a roof, for instance—such is not always the case. We cannot conclude, for instance, that Lincoln got something wrong by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. What we can say is that this act was, from a certain perspective, surprising. Insofar as Lincoln declared in his inaugural address that he had “no inclination” to interfere with slavery in the states where it existed, his subsequent decision two years later to proclaim the freedom of slaves in many of those states was indeed remarkable and calls for explanation. At the same time, it would sound odd to ask what caused, say, the normally courteous pastor to say something polite. Insofar as we have come to expect this pastor to say polite things, we would not typically think to inquire about the causes of his politeness.

We can also ask “what caused person X to” questions when a person’s beliefs, views, motives, or the like come to deviate from what is expected for or from that person or people in general.

What caused Rand Paul to see the virtue of our beliefs [when just last week he condemned them]?

What caused Snooki to believe what her father said [everyone knows her father is a liar]?

What caused Anders Behring Breivik to think that it is okay to go to a youth camp and slaughter children?

In contrast, it would sound odd to ask what caused some “normal” Norwegian man to think that it was not okay go to a youth camp and slaughter children, for we do not expect Norwegian men to hold such a view.

Another observation we can make about “what caused person X to” questions relates to the types of answers that we ordinarily give to them. Suffice it to say that there are a whole range of answers that would normally be considered appropriate, depending of course on the context:

What caused the contractor to fall from the roof?

She lost her balance.

She got distracted.

She chose not to wear her safety harness.

What caused the young singer to take her own life?

She could no longer afford the cost of her anti-depressants.

She blamed herself for her sister’s death.

She was protesting what she considered to be an unjust war.

What caused Rand Paul to see the virtue of our beliefs [when just last week he condemned them]?

He had a change of heart.

He gave the issue some deeper thought.

He finally stopped listening to his father.

Contrary to those who might suppose that inquiring about causes is to ask about “external” forces rather than “internal” motives, reasons, and understandings, we see that it can sound

perfectly natural to talk about motives, reasons, and understandings in response to “what caused person X to” questions, depending on the context. Accounts that focus on choosing, protesting, blaming oneself, giving thought, having a change of heart (as well as yearning, believing, deciding, wanting, perceiving, etc.) may all be acceptable answers to inquiries about what caused a person to do something.

Cause Questions, Continued

We can make similar observations about other kinds of cause questions. Consider, first, “what caused X to” questions, where X is not a person, but an institution, country, group of people, or the like:

What caused the Americans to rebel?

What caused the United Nations to send troops to Bosnia-Herzegovina?

What caused the Soviet Union to collapse?

In such questions, we endow the group, institution, country, etc. with agency or structure, and are moved to ask about causes because we are surprised at some action that they have taken (rebellious, sending troops) or at a change to an expected, normal, or healthy state that they have experienced (collapsing). And in answering such questions we may well find it natural, in the right context, to adduce motives, reasons, and understandings (“The Americans wanted more autonomy,” “The Soviet people no longer believed in Communism,” etc.).

Or consider “what caused X” questions, where X is a (human) event or process:

What caused the French revolution?

What caused the decline of the Roman empire?

What caused the housing bubble in the United States?

Again, in answering this type of question, we may well find it natural to adduce motives, reasons, and understandings (e.g., “It was greed that caused the housing bubble”). As well, when we ask this type of question we point attention to the occurrence of something surprising (though without identifying who or what may have caused it). It sounds natural to ask “What caused the housing bubble in the United States?” but we would not normally ask what caused a housing bubble to not occur, unless of course we had good reason to believe that it could or should have occurred, in which case we might ask something like “Why was there no housing bubble in Switzerland [even though so many other countries experienced one]”? It would sound odd or clumsy, in contrast, for someone to ask instead “What caused there to be no housing bubble in Switzerland?” When we ask cause questions, we inquire about occurrences that depart in some way from what is normal, habitual, or expected. It is for this reason that “what caused there to be no” sounds awkward: Nothing happened to provoke our surprise. In contrast, we do ask why questions even when “nothing happened.” Thus it sounds natural to ask “Why was there no revolution in India?” or “Why has there never been a revolution in India?” but blundering to say “What caused there to be no revolution in India?” and downright ugly to utter “What caused there to never be a revolution in India?” Tellingly, a

search of Google Books yields more than 200,000 results for “why was there no,” but zero occurrences of “what caused there to be no.”

We also need to examine cause questions in the present tense, which complicates a bit the observation that we ask cause questions about deviations from the normal, habitual, or expected. The present tense, after all, can be used in cause questions (and in the English language generally) to indicate that the phenomenon in question occurs repeatedly. Take, for instance, the following questions:

What causes poverty?

What causes revolutions?

What causes almost all Americans to follow industrial callings? (to quote Henry Reeve’s translation of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Book II, chapter XIX).

In each of these questions, the present tense is used to indicate that the phenomenon in question (poverty, revolutions, Americans following industrial callings) occurs or appears again and again. Yet even in these cases, the “what causes” question is used to indicate that the phenomenon is in some way unexpected or abnormal. Take as an example the quote from Reeve’s translation of *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville observes that in European countries like France, only a limited number of people take up industrial and commercial occupations, whereas in the United States almost everyone does, an oddity that he seeks to explain. For this reason, Reeve finds it appropriate to translate Tocqueville’s original “*ce qui fait pencher*” with “what causes.” It is also noteworthy that just as with past-tense cause questions, answers to “what causes” questions can include motives, reasons, and understandings (“It’s a sense of injustice that causes revolution,” etc.).

One additional observation about “what causes” questions is in order. There are contexts in which to ask “why” is to ask something different from asking about “cause,” and such differences are particularly pronounced in questions posed in the present tense. When we ask, say, “Why is there war?” we seem to be inviting a set of answers that does not overlap completely with the answers that we invite by asking “What causes war?” To the “why” question someone may well answer “There is no good reason for war; it serves no purpose,” an answer that would sound odd to the “what causes” question. Some “why” questions, it appears, can be construed to mean “What grand purpose does X serve?” or “What larger meaning should we attribute to X?” in a way that “what causes” questions cannot.

Of What Significance?

There are still other kinds of cause questions, most notably “What is/was the cause of X?” and “What are/were the causes of X?” Without belaboring an analysis of these question types, let me just say that their uses do not appear, at first blush at least, to be grossly different than those of the cause questions examined above. There is, to be sure, a much finer analysis one could work up of what we do when we ask all the different types of cause questions, and the ways in which we

do different things when we ask why and cause questions. This essay has only nicked the surface of these topics. Nonetheless, the present analysis does suggest that despite some differences between the various kinds of cause questions, we can identify two similarities in their use. In all of the permutations here examined it seems that (1) we inquire about causes when we are surprised, and (2) it is perfectly acceptable when answering such questions to invoke reasons, motives, and understandings as causes, context permitting. Of what significance are these two observations for political scientists?

Reasons, Motives, and Understandings as Causes

That we often assign motives, reasons, and understandings as causes in everyday contexts is noteworthy for two reasons. On the one hand, it points to the potential poverty of causal accounts offered up by those positivist scholars who for whatever reason choose to disregard motives, reasons, and understandings. King, Keohane, and Verba (1994: 110), for instance, warn against using concepts like motivation or intention in causal explanations because these concepts are “abstract, unmeasurable, and unobservable.” What is needed, they argue, are concrete indicators of such concepts that can be observed and measured. By this view, if something cannot be measured it cannot be part of a causal account. But what are we to make, say, of the woman who shouts out, moments before taking her life at the gates to the Pentagon, that she intends to do so to protest the prosecution of a war she finds unconscionable? How are we to “measure” her statement and the context in which she made it? What are their size, amount, or degree? To the extent that we cannot answer such questions with precision, King, Keohane, and Verba tell us, we must forgo talk of motives or intentions in our causal account, a move that would surely leave us with an impoverished or incorrect understanding of what caused the woman to take her own life.

On the other hand, and relatedly, the insight that motives, reasons, and understandings often figure into our everyday causal accounts points to the untenability of the position taken by some interpretivist scholars who eschew inquiring about causes because to do so, they contend, necessarily means inquiring about external, mechanical forces. Gunnell (1968: 193), for one, seems to adopt such a position when he argues that “any thoroughgoing attempt to explain action and the relationship between mental episodes and observed behavior in causal terms, that is, [in] the language of physical events, will necessarily founder.” Gunnell here mistakenly conflates giving a causal account with giving a casual account couched solely in the language of physical events. Yet we have seen that people often adduce reasons, talk about motives, and reference understandings when they give causal accounts in everyday contexts. A distinction between “mental” accounts on the one hand and “causal” accounts on the other does not hold up.

One gets the sense that Gunnell is reacting to those in the scientific community who have sought, following in the footsteps of Hume, to define causality in mechanical terms as observable patterns of regularity that are contiguous in time and

place (that which precedes the other is called the “cause” and the other the “effect”). Imagine, as Hume (2007 [1777]) did, one billiard ball hitting another.

We should not forget, however, that even within the realm of philosophy there are other ways of conceptualizing causality. The most enduring, surely, is that of Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, Book I Chapter iii, 983a, b), who identified four kinds of causes: formal (“the ‘reason why’ of a thing”), material (“the matter or substrate”), efficient (“the source of motion;” it is this type of cause that most resembles Hume’s conception), and final (“the purpose or ‘good’”).³ Much could be said about this Aristotelian approach, but I limit myself to noting that Aristotle’s more expansive conception of causality is today attracting the attention of political scientists who are critical of the narrower Humean tradition (e.g., Wendt 2003; Kurki 2008).

Be that as it may, it is important to note that Aristotle did not write about “cause.” He wrote about “αἴτιον” (aition). The English-language word “cause” comes from the Latin word “*causa*,” which itself apparently derives from “*caudo*,” or “I strike, cut” (Conway 1923: 62; De Vaan 2008: 101), and may have meant something like “giving blow for blow” or “tit for tat” (De Villiers 1926: 404). By extension, *causa* came also to mean “dispute,” and in classical times it was used in the legal realm to mean “lawsuit” (ibid.). The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* lists a number of meanings for the term, among them:

A legal case, trial.

A case or plea considered from the point of view of its merits, a (good, etc.) case.

A ground (of action), justificatory principle, (good) reason.

A motive, reason (for an action).

Both the place of *causa* in the realm of law and an understanding of *causa* in terms of reasons and motives have carried over into the English language. In the legal realm, judges and lawyers in the United States often speak of “having good cause,” “challenging for cause,” “probable cause,” and “cause of action”—all of which are used to refer in some way to having proper or adequate reasons for acting in particular way. In these uses, “cause” does not refer to a mechanistic force but to a reason that justifies taking a specific course of action. Such specialized but stock uses in the realm of law again point to how central reasons and the like are to extra-scientific (or more precisely, extra-Humean) ways in which people talk about “causes.”

Surprises

In our ordinary-language use, we ask cause questions when we encounter surprises for which we want explanation. We ask them when the routinized or the expected is violated. By Hume’s conception, in contrast, to invoke the language of causes is to take notice of uniformity. To ask about causes in ordinary language is to inquire about the irregular, to investigate Humean causes is to seek regularity.

This difference between cause as an explanation of surprise and cause as an account of regular conjunction maps in one intriguing way onto the distinction that Arendt (1958: 38–

49, 191) draws between action and behavior. Action, by Arendt’s conception, is singular and unpredictable whereas behavior is conformist and predictable. It is interesting and perhaps troubling to note that a good deal of political science research is premised upon and investigates behavior in this Arendtian sense. The rational choice approach to studying politics, for one, is premised upon people behaving in routinized, predictable ways. For this reason, rational choice models, as one proponent concedes, “are not usually useful for explaining acts of extraordinary heroism, stupidity, or cruelty” (Geddes 2003: 181). But it is often acts that we perceive to be extraordinarily heroic, stupid, or cruel which provoke us to pose “what caused” questions:

What caused the passerby to run into the burning building to save a person she had never met?

What caused President Bush to decide that going to war against Iraq was in the national interest of the United States?

What caused the father to disown his son?

Some political science research, to be sure, does investigate the extraordinary, even if it is not always couched in “what caused” questions. To cite just two examples, Fujii (2009) asks what caused neighbors to kill neighbors during the Rwandan genocide, while Monroe (2006) asks what caused ordinary people to risk their own lives in order to rescue Jews during World War II. At the heart of both Fujii’s and Monroe’s books are in-depth interviews that the two authors conducted with the actors in question. Fujii and Monroe examine carefully the stories that people tell to access the reasons and motives that stood behind the extraordinary actions that interest them. But the kind of narrative analysis undertaken by Fujii and Monroe is relatively rare in political science. Many political science tools—rational choice and statistical modeling to name just two—are not geared towards investigating the extraordinary. When one searches only for Humean patterns of observable regularity (sometimes referred to as “generalization” or “general laws”), only behavior in the Arendtian sense receives attention. In short, there is sometimes a disjuncture between the kinds of (surprising) human actions about which people think to ask causal questions and the kinds of tools political scientists have developed to explain (regularized) human behavior. Consequently, when political scientists forgo investigating the extraordinary only because it cannot be adequately explored by tools developed to explain the ordinary, they divert our attention from some of the causal questions we most want to ask.

Conclusion

There are, in summary, three lessons that I draw from this inquiry into the ordinary use of cause questions. First, positivist scholars who eschew consideration of motives, reasons, and understandings when investigating the causes of human action are in danger of providing accounts that are misleading or off the mark. Second, interpretivist scholars who refrain from investigating causal questions because they believe to do so necessarily entails providing only mechanistic explana-

tions mistakenly conflate causal accounts in general with Humean accounts of causality, and thereby overly restrict the scope of their analyses. Third, the kinds of tools political scientists have developed to explain regularized human behavior direct attention away from inquiry into the extraordinary, and thus too from some of the causal questions we most want to pose.

I must also make one final point. If political scientists in seeking explanation for surprising human actions were to ask only cause questions—even ones that invite investigation into reasons, motives, and understandings—their inquiries would be dangerously constrained and potentially misguided. Cause questions, after all, are premised on the asker having accurately interpreted the situation, but misinterpretation is always possible. To the question, “What caused the contractor to fall from the roof?” someone with more intimate knowledge of what happened might reply, “She didn’t fall, she jumped” and thereby challenge seeing the event as an accident. We must always be willing to step back and ask more fundamentally, “What’s going on here?”⁴

Notes

¹ I thank Robert Adcock, Ivan Ascher, Xavier Collier, Barbara Cruikshank, and Dvora Yanow for their insightful comments on earlier drafts. The usual disclaimers apply.

² I understand “normal” to include both a descriptive sense (conforming to a regular pattern) and a moral sense (conforming to a moral norm). Consequently, the deviation can be from either a regular pattern of action or an established moral norm, or both.

³ I quote here the English translation of Hugh Tredennick.

⁴ In invoking the question “What’s going on here?” I invite you, the reader, to reflect on how the problems explored in this essay relate to those examined by Schwedler in her contribution to the symposium.

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Puzzle

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In political science, there appears to be a growing consensus that while methodological pluralism either is or ought to be embraced, everyone still needs to have a puzzle at the center of her research. But what is a puzzle? How do we find them, and what are we supposed to do once we have one? Can there be productive political inquiry without puzzles? In this paper, I examine the centrality of puzzles to methodological debates about how to do political science. I will draw some distinctions between puzzles, problems, and other kinds of questions, but I most especially want to raise some critical doubts about the consensus on structuring political inquiry in ways that prioritize finding answers.

What could possibly be wrong with finding answers? Certainly, if we cannot explain things for which we previously had no compelling answer, how are we to learn, to expand our ability to understand political phenomena, to increase our knowledge, to advance our paradigms and gain theoretical traction? Before answering these questions, let’s first look at puzzles.

Part 1: What Is a Puzzle, and Why Do We Need Them?

In its simplest form, a puzzle is something in need of an answer or a solution. It is a surprising circumstance, set of relations, condition, phenomenon, behavior, or outcome for which our existing knowledge does not immediately offer a means of comprehension.

In political science, the terms “question” and “problem” are sometimes used almost interchangeably with “puzzle,” as in “What is your question?” Oral and projected presentations typically include an early statement of a clearly identified research question, problem, or puzzle that structures the inquiry and, hopefully, peaks the audience’s curiosity. The ensuing discussion then articulates the precise methodology and data that were used to provide an answer or answers, hopefully with counterintuitive insights. In a job talk, the kiss of death is