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REVIEW

DAVID OWENS

Causes and Coincidences

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, cloth £27.95

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In this fine book, David Owens presents a new theory of causation based on the idea that the notions of cause and coincidence are intimately related. That there is a link between the concept of cause and the concept of coincidence is not news. As Richard Sorabji has argued, Aristotle thought that coincidences cannot be explained. What is new in Owens's book is the claim that this apparent truism can form the basis of a full-scale analysis of causation.

Consider Aristotle's example: a man eats some spicy food and goes to a well to quench his thirst; there happen to be some brigands at the well who rob and kill him. There is a causal explanation of why the man goes to the well; there is a causal explanation of why the brigands go to the well; there is a causal explanation of why the brigands kill the man. But there is no causal explanation of why the brigands and the man are at the well at the same time: their simultaneous arrival is a coincidence and therefore cannot be explained. Part of what it means to call something a coincidence is that it is inexplicable. For consider: if one of the brigands had cunningly provided the man with spicy food in order to lead him to the well, their meeting would not have been a coincidence; it would have been explicable. But coincidences are not explicable.

Owens thinks that this idea is the key to the analysis of causation. The reason coincidences cannot be causally explained is as follows. A coincidence 'is an event which can be divided into components separately produced by independent causal factors' (p. 13). (Owens dispenses with the common-sense idea that coincidences have to be out-of-the-ordinary.) The notion of 'Causal factors' is then independently analysed in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions (plus laws of nature). To causally explain A is (at least) to give conditions necessary and sufficient in the circumstances for the occurrence of A. To causally explain a compound

event A&B (like Aristotle's example: the brigands arrive at the well & the man arrives at the well) would be either for one of the component events to be necessary and sufficient for the other, or for a third event to be necessary and sufficient for A and for B (a common cause). There is no common cause of the brigands arriving at the well, and neither the ruffians' arrival nor the hapless man's arrival are necessary and sufficient for one another. Therefore, their meeting, like all coincidences, has no causal explanation.

To get from the claim that coincidences have no causal *explanation* to the claim that a *cause* is an event which ensures that its effects are no coincidence, Owens identifies causation with causal explanation. So the canonical form of causal statements is 'A because B', where 'A' and 'B' are sentences. In this he aligns himself with writers like Mellor, as against Davidson, who sees the canonical form of causal statement as 'A caused B' where 'caused' is a two-place predicate and 'A' and 'B' are singular terms. It is not a coincidence, of course, that Davidson also distinguishes sharply between causation and causal explanation.

Owens's analysis is then applied to some of the tough problems in the theory of causation: notably, the direction of causation, the relation between causes and laws, causation and physicalism, causal theories of action and deviant causal chains. In many of these discussions, Owens makes valuable and original points which are independent of his main thesis (for example, he challenges the conventional wisdom that the laws of nature are contingent, and that Davidson has refuted non-causal theories of the explanation of action).

Owens's book is notable for its clarity of style and argument, and his original thesis is developed judiciously and with imagination. In particular: the physicalist account of 'levels of causation' exhibits a precision rare in discussions of the special sciences, and the discussion of the direction of causation is particularly elegant and inventive. And few would disagree, surely, with the idea that there is a close connection between the concept of cause and the concept of coincidence. However, although at the level of detailed argument Owens is incisive, his comments at a more general level are somewhat disappointing. For instance, he does not discuss to a satisfactory extent the status of his analysis of causation.

One question, raised by Peter Menzies in a review in *Mind*, is whether Owens is providing a reductive account of causation. Owens's analysis of causation would be a reductive analysis if it explained the concept of causation in terms of other, simpler concepts (as, for example, the regularity analysis explains causation in terms of constant conjunction). This would only work if the concept of coincidence were a simpler concept than the concept of causation, thus illuminating the latter concept. But is it? It seems no simpler or more intuitive to say that astrological facts do not

cause psychological facts *because* their co-occurrence is a mere coincidence than it does to say that a link between astrological facts and psychological facts is coincidental *because* the first does not cause the second. It is equally natural and simple to say that the position of the stars does not cause my emotional state as it is to say that the position of the stars and my emotional state are coincidental.

Of course, Owens has his own more technical account of coincidence, in terms of the independence of the necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of the constituent events. From this it follows directly, as we have seen, that coincidences (so defined) have no causes. The simpler concepts now are necessary and sufficient conditions, in terms of which causation is defined. So causation is being reductively defined: in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. But the idea that causation should be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions is less distinctive and surprising than Owens's original analysis in terms of coincidence seemed to be.

Another area where I would have welcomed a little more general speculation is over the question of causal realism, and its relation to the distinction between causation and causal explanation. It is well known that the concept of explanation has, as it were, an objective and a subjective aspect. On the one hand, a good explanation is one that picks up on those objective features of reality that are (as it may be) necessary and/or sufficient for the occurrence of the fact or event in question. But we should also consider the familiar fact that whether something is a good explanation is interest-relative. In a given explanation, it can be hard to disentangle which aspects of the explanation derive from our interests and which aspects pick up on objective causal (or non-causal) features. Realists can drag these aspects apart by distinguishing between causation and causal explanation. But since Owens's account identifies causation and causal explanation, I feel he needs to say more about how he would isolate these aspects.

These matters are subtle and complex, if only because the concepts of objectivity and mind-independence are so problematic—and as Owens himself says, it is often hard to know what the terms of the debate are. In a concise and frank appendix, Owens confronts these issues, and admits that he cannot fully account for them. Few can; but I would have liked the book to have been a little longer at this point.

Despite the many virtues of *Causes and Coincidences*, Owens has not yet convinced me that the notion of a coincidence must have such a central role to play in the theory of causation. But his book is none the less one of the best books on causation to appear in recent years.