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Three Barriers to Philosophical Progress

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Introduction

Carnap famously claimed that metaphysicians lack shared standards. I begin by supporting and extending this claim, arguing that a current lack of fixed standards, in every area of philosophy, best explains why philosophers working on the same topic often do so within different, incompatible frameworks or paradigms, though only one of these frameworks is supposed to be correct (section “The absence of fixed standards in philosophy”). Unlike Carnap, I interpret this situation optimistically, as primarily indicating that we are far from the end of methodological inquiry. Our present lack of fixed standards is, however, associated with three barriers to progress in philosophy. First (section “Barrier #1: Intra-disciplinary siloing”), lack of fixed standards encourages intra-disciplinary silos, where philosophers ignore work outside of their own paradigm, leading to dialectical and argumentative difficulties and misspent intellectual energy; here the recent introduction of “Grounding” (a primitive relation or notion of metaphysical dependence) serves as a case in point. Second (section, “Barrier #2: Sociological determinants”), without fixed standards, which frameworks are embraced is often determined more by sociological factors having to do with elite influence and/or disciplinary inertia than by philosophical or other motivations for the approach; here the status of Grounding again serves as illustration, as does David Lewis’s influence *vis-à-vis* Hume’s Dictum (the thesis that there are no metaphysically necessary connections between wholly distinct entities). Third (section, “Barrier #3: Bias”), lack of fixed standards encourages (implicit and/or explicit) bias – a general empirical fact which, applied to philosophy, provides a new explanation of why philosophy has a distinctively bad problem with bias as compared to certain other argumentative and technical fields. I close (section, “Moving beyond the barriers”) with some suggestions about how to move beyond these barriers.

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The Absence of Fixed Standards in Philosophy

Why think there are no fixed standards in philosophy? The answer concerns a puzzle, nicely suggested by Hume's remark:

Disputes are multiplied, as if every thing was uncertain; and these disputes are managed with the greatest warmth, as if every thing was certain. (1739/1978, xviii)

To see the puzzle, it is useful to distinguish two ways progress in a field may proceed (Wilson 2013). The first occurs within a preferred paradigm, understood in broadly Kuhnian terms as a framework for inquiry into a given topic, which includes certain theoretical and methodological assumptions treated as constitutive of the investigative approach. Progress within a preferred framework is "vertical," consisting mainly in constructing and testing theories within the framework's constraints. Vertical progress within a single preferred framework (or restricted set of such) is characteristic of the sciences, reflecting that scientists aim to explore what is in fact the case, so that their efforts are most efficiently expended within the framework(s) taken to likely model the way things actually are. Hence when a paradigm is deemed unworkable in the sciences, it is replaced – there is, as Kuhn put it, a "paradigm shift" from one preferred framework to another.

A second "horizontal" sort of progress consists in identifying new paradigms – new ways of thinking about or engaging with the topic. Horizontal progress is characteristic of deeply ecumenical fields such as art and pure mathematics. To be sure, individual artists and mathematicians may primarily engage in vertical explorations within a single framework; but the fruitful identification of new terrain is itself seen as valuable, and importantly, there is no presupposition that any one framework is closer to actuality or otherwise more "correct."

Does philosophical progress primarily proceed along horizontal or vertical dimensions? Herein lies the puzzle. On the one hand, much philosophical progress involves the horizontal identification of new ways of theorizing about a given topic ("disputes are multiplied, as if every thing was uncertain"). For example, by way of understanding morality we have Aristotle's virtue ethics, Hume's sentimentalism, Mill's utilitarianism, Kant's deontologism, Stephenson's expressivism, and so on; and a similar multiplicity characterizes philosophical accounts of objects, causation, modality, law, art, gender – you name it. On the other hand, these horizontal efforts are not of the same ecumenical character as those in art or mathematics. Rather, philosophers typically suppose, like scientists, that there's a fact of the matter about which paradigm treating a given topic is correct, and conduct their vertical explorations accordingly. Indeed, philosophers often take their favored treatments to be not just correct, but *necessarily* so ("disputes are managed [...] as if everything was certain").

Philosophical progress thus proceeds both horizontally and vertically, in a way posing a puzzle: if philosophical paradigms are not created equal, then why are there so many competing paradigms for any given topic?

A plausible and explanatory answer is that we are currently at a fairly rudimentary stage of philosophical inquiry. It is not just that, for any given topic, we don't yet possess all the relevant data – that much is also true of the sciences. More crucially, we do not yet possess shared, fixed standards for assessing whether a given approach to, or account of, the topic is correct. Of course, there are some fixed standards – the usual logical inferences, for example. But there's a great deal, methodologically speaking, that is variable across frameworks, including which theses are taken as foundational guides to theorizing (e.g., Hume's Dictum, to be discussed), and which ranks and weights are assigned to theoretical desiderata such as parsimony, elegance, fruitfulness, plausibility, and compatibility with other beliefs.

Carnap inferred from the lack of fixed standards in metaphysics to the meaninglessness of metaphysical disputes; and since every area of philosophy is in the same shape, Carnap's pessimistic inference, if correct, would apply across the board. A less pessimistic but still deflationary response would be to maintain that philosophy is more like mathematics than science: what philosophers do is map and develop conceptual space concerning the range of possible treatments of a topic, as per Benj Hellie's evocative description of philosophy as "the neo-natal intensive care unit of theory" (personal communication).

My own view is optimistic and non-deflationary. These are early days, and it remains open that we will some day converge on fixed standards. In past decades much progress has been made in philosophical methodology, with one upshot being (ironically enough) widespread rejection of Carnap's broadly verificationist criterion of meaning, and another being increased articulation of the content and means of satisfying theoretical desiderata. Moreover, our standards are not so diverse that we are unable to make working assessments of certain frameworks: indeed, it will emerge in what follows that some frameworks are on the table for sociological rather than methodologically principled reasons. Accordingly, there's no reason at present to deny that, in general, there is a fact of the matter about which philosophical frameworks are getting it right.

That's the good news. The bad news is that our lack of fixed standards poses three barriers to philosophical progress.

Barrier #1: Intra-Disciplinary Siloing

The first upshot of the lack of fixed standards is that philosophers addressing a topic within one paradigm are under no clear pressure to read or engage work by those addressing the topic within other paradigms, so they commonly feel free to dismiss or ignore such work. As I've argued (Wilson 2013), such

dogmatism is premature, and when one framework is comparatively dominant (as is common), poses various barriers to philosophical progress, including discouraging the development of live alternatives, and preventing the proper testing of the dogmatically assumed framework against such alternatives.

Here I want to connect such insularity to what I call “intra-disciplinary siloing.” Disciplinary siloing occurs when practitioners in different fields operate in ignorance of other work on a shared topic, often leading to reinventing wheels, mischaracterizations of what is known about the topic, and so on – with all the wasted intellectual effort such problems imply. The lack of fixed standards and associated tendency for philosophers to ignore work done in “outside” frameworks amounts to intra-disciplinary siloing, and is subject to similar difficulties.

I offer the recent introduction of “Grounding,” a primitive notion or relation of metaphysical dependence, as a case in point.

First, some background, familiar to anyone working in the metaphysics of science or mind. Since the 1950s, much philosophical attention has focused on how to understand mental states (as well as other special science entities and features) on a physicalist view, according to which, schematically speaking, all broadly scientific goings-on are “nothing over and above” – are completely metaphysically dependent on – (typically complex combinations of) fundamental physical goings-on. The central question here concerns how to fill in the schematic relation of metaphysical dependence, so as to guarantee physicalism’s intended contrast with its traditional rivals (e.g., substance dualism and strong emergentism) in a principled and illuminating way. Now, the original parsimonious suggestion, offered by reductive physicalists, was that the relation is *type identity*; focusing on the mental, the suggestion was that every mental state type is identical with a physical state type. Such a view faced concerns, however, including that the multiple realizability of mental states blocks type-level identifications, and that reductionism fails to preserve the ontological and causal autonomy of the mental. Reductionists have their responses, but in any case, starting in the 1970s, there were many attempts to understand the metaphysical dependence at issue in ways making sense of non-reductive versions of physicalism.

One such attempt appealed to *supervenience*, an abstract relation of modal correlation first offered in this context by Davidson (1970), with the suggestion being that if mental and physical states were strongly correlated, this would establish the metaphysical dependence of the mental on the physical in a way compatible with non-reduction. But supervenience was soon seen as inadequate for physicalist purposes, since even the strongest correlations are compatible with the mental’s being over and above (e.g., strongly emergent from) the physical. Hence in ensuing decades alternative non-reductive approaches to metaphysical dependence were developed, appealing to diverse metaphysical relations such as functional realization (Putnam 1967; Shoemaker 1975;

Melnyk 1995), the determinable-determinate relation (MacDonald and MacDonald 1986; Yablo 1992), robustly ontological explanation (Horgan 1993), trope identity (Ehring 1996; Robb 1997), the proper-subset-of-powers relation (Wilson 1999; Shoemaker 2000/2001), the part-whole relation (Shoemaker 2000/2001; Clapp 2001), and so on. Hundreds of articles and books have been published exploring the features and applications of these and other metaphysically substantive accounts of metaphysical dependence.

Now fast forward to the 2000s, when Fine, Schaffer, and Rosen turned their attention to metaphysical dependence, positing a primitive notion or relation of “Grounding” as operative in contexts where locutions such as “nothing over and above,” “in virtue of,” “constituted by,” and the like are at issue – as in, for example, the physicalism debates.

Why posit Grounding? Synthesizing a bit, the stated motivation was as follows (see Wilson 2014). To start, contemporary metaphysicians have not been paying attention to metaphysical dependence:

On the now dominant Quinean view, metaphysics is about what there is. Metaphysics so conceived is concerned with such questions as whether properties exist, whether meanings exist, and whether numbers exist. I will argue for the revival of a more traditional Aristotelian view, on which metaphysics is about what grounds what. [...] It is about what is fundamental, and what derives from it.

(Schaffer 2009, 345, 379)

When metaphysicians have paid attention to such dependence, they have done so in semantic, epistemic, or supervenience-based terms, as a kind of empiricist hangover. But semantic and epistemic treatments are problematic and beside the point:

[R]eduction should be construed as a metaphysical rather than as a linguistic or a semantical relation. [...] we need to restore ourselves to a state of metaphysical innocence in which reduction is seen to concern the subject-matter itself and not the means by which it might be represented or cognized.

(Fine 2001, 10)

And supervenience is too weak to ensure metaphysical dependence:

[S]upervenience analyses of grounding all fail.

(Schaffer 2009, 364)

One [...] reason for regarding the idioms of dependence with suspicion is the thought that [...] the idioms are always dispensable in practice in

favor of the idioms of modal metaphysics – entailment, supervenience [...] And yet it seems to me that this is not true at all.

(Rosen 2010, 113)

Properly characterizing metaphysical dependence requires a non-causal metaphysical notion or relation:

A number of philosophers have recently become receptive to the idea that, in addition to scientific or causal explanation, there may be a distinctive kind of metaphysical explanation, in which explanans and explanandum are connected, not through some sort of causal mechanism, but through some form of constitutive determination.

(Fine 2001, 38)

But there are no available accounts of metaphysical dependence in familiar terms. So we should posit a primitive notion or relation of such dependence – Grounding – as operative in any and all contexts where metaphysical dependence is at issue:

There have been other attempts to analyze grounding, including those centered around existential dependence counterfactuals [...] I know of none that succeed. [...] Grounding should rather be taken as primitive, as per the neo-Aristotelian approach (cf. Fine 2001: 1). Grounding is an unanalyzable but needed notion – it is the primitive structuring conception of metaphysics.

(Schaffer 2009, 364)

[T]here is no prospect of a reductive account or definition of the grounding idiom [...] So if we take the notion on board, we will be accepting it as primitive [...] I begin with the working hypothesis that there is a single salient form of metaphysical dependence to which the idioms we have been invoking all refer [...].

(Rosen 2010, 113–114)

Of course, there is a cost to admitting such a primitive; but the cost of Grounding is well-paid, in allowing us to treat metaphysical dependence in properly metaphysical terms.

Now, it should be clear, given the actual state of play in the metaphysics of science and mind, that this story line is (to put it mildly) dialectically inaccurate. Again, numerous highly articulate, explicitly metaphysical accounts of metaphysical dependence have been advanced and discussed in past decades. It is thus not true that metaphysicians have been ignoring metaphysical

dependence, or that metaphysical dependence has been viewed with “suspicion” except as involving supervenience or the like, or that philosophers have “only recently” become receptive to there being constitutive metaphysical explanations ... and so on.

What explains why Fine, Schaffer, and Rosen got the dialectical facts so wrong? Plausibly, each was working (or had been working) within an intra-disciplinary silo that simply ignored the work of philosophers working outside that silo. Fine is a brilliant lone wolf, who forges his own frameworks, and doesn’t much visit any others. Schaffer and Rosen represent a different case: each was raised in Lewis’s Humean framework, within which it *is* true that metaphysical dependence is understood in terms of supervenience (or identity). Given the frameworks within which these philosophers were or had been operating – and, more importantly, given that they didn’t feel obliged to familiarize themselves with work done outside those frameworks – their mischaracterization of the circa-2000s state of play concerning metaphysical dependence is unsurprising. It’s unsurprising – but this intra-disciplinary siloing has led to several difficulties, of the sort characteristic of disciplinary siloing.

First, siloing led to enthymematic argumentation: given the many existing accounts of metaphysical dependence in terms of specific metaphysical relations, there’s no good argument from the failure of representational/epistemic/modal/causal notions or relations to make sense of metaphysical dependence, to the posit of primitive Grounding.

Second, siloing has encouraged continuing ignorance of, and failure to engage with, existing work on metaphysical dependence. Publications, especially by prominent philosophers, propagate quickly, and many readers naturally assume that confidently expressed descriptions of a dialectic are correct. Indeed, it’s common for papers on Grounding to start by repeating the fiction according to which contemporary metaphysicians ignored metaphysical dependence until Fine, Schaffer, and Rosen came along; and so the inaccuracy propagates. The initial failure to engage with existing work has also propagated, as per Dasgupta’s (2014) defense of a Grounding-based formulation of physicalism, which doesn’t reference any existing literature on formulating physicalism, and which suffers accordingly by motivating the proposal in enthymematic (“identity, logical analysis, and supervenience don’t work, so let’s formulate physicalism in terms of primitive Grounding”) fashion.

Third, siloing has led to wheel-reinventing and retrograde motions. The original proponents initially characterized Grounding as irreflexive (nothing can Ground itself), asymmetric (if x Grounds y , then y does not Ground x), and transitive (if x Grounds y , and y Grounds z , then x Grounds z). Subsequently, many papers on Grounding have focused on pointing out that some cases of metaphysical dependence lack one or more of these features. This is wheel-reinventing, since familiarity with the existing options and applications would

have made clear that the diverse forms of metaphysical dependence proposed in the philosophical literature do not have any of these features in common (see Wilson 2014). And Dasgupta's proposal is retrograde, offering as an advance what is effectively the schematic starting point of investigations into how to formulate physicalism.

Fourth, siloing has led to misspent intellectual effort by those who took the revolutionary rhetoric of Fine, Schaffer, and Rosen at face value and jumped aboard the Grounding train, hitching their work to a framework taking this primitive as foundational. Having yet to see any reason for or useful results stemming from this posit, I take much of this effort to have been wasted (including that directed at the question – a spandrel of Grounding's overly abstract nature – “what Grounds Grounding?”).¹ I might be wrong – we're still far from the end of inquiry! Still, it remains that work so far on Grounding has mainly consisted in either unneeded and unilluminating applications or unnecessary brush-clearing, where, as Berkeley put it in the introduction to his *Treatise* (1710/1998), “we have first raised a dust, and then complain, we cannot see.”

Barrier #2: Sociological Determinants

A second upshot of the lack of fixed standards is that it makes room for sociological considerations to be the main determinants of which frameworks or views are taken seriously. As shown, the lack of motivation for Grounding hasn't prevented a rush on the topic. It's hard not to see this fad as primarily driven by the elite influence of the original proponents.

For another example, consider “Hume's Dictum” (generalizing Hume's ban on necessary causal connections), according to which there are no metaphysically necessary connections between wholly distinct entities. For decades, conformity to this thesis has been a commonly accepted constraint on metaphysical theorizing. Why? There is little intuitive or scientific pull to Hume's Dictum. Underlying this thesis is the supposition that what it is to be a broadly scientific entity or feature is ultimately divorced from anything the entity or feature does or can do. But neither common sense nor the sciences give us any reason to believe this, even for the fundamental goings-on that Humeans take to be “freely recombinable.” Nothing in the sciences suggests, for example, that what negatively charged electrons do is contingent, such that they might rather have attracted each other, or played leapfrog. On the contrary: physics and other sciences characterize natural entities and features in terms of interactions and other causal notions;² and in everyday life we obviously take what objects and properties can do to be crucial to what they are – not in crude behaviorist terms, but as part of life's richly interacting mental and physical pageant. We have no clear access to or concern with whatever non-causal core

is, according to the Humean, supposed to underlie the contingently sprinkled causal and other connections.

That said, Hume's Dictum makes sense if you are a strict empiricist like Hume, who takes the content of beliefs to come down to patching together mental copies of superficial sense perceptions. To take Hume's original example, it presumably *is* contingent what will happen if something superficially shaped like a billiard ball appears to touch something else superficially shaped like a billiard ball – perhaps the “billiard balls” will turn into “butterflies.” But contemporary proponents of Hume's Dictum are not strict empiricists – they allow that we can infer to the existence and natures of goings-on beyond the reach of experience. And as MacBride (2005) observes:

[I]t is a curious fact that the proponents of the contemporary Humean programme – Lewis included – having abandoned the empiricist theory of thought that underwrites Hume's rejection of necessary connections provide precious little by way of motivation for the view. (127)

Indeed, Lewis's motivations for taking Hume's Dictum as foundational are unconvincing. He frequently pronounces that he finds necessary connections “mysterious”; but if anything is mysterious here, it's the attribution of an inaccessible intrinsic nature to broadly scientific entities or features floating free of anything they do. Nor do Lewis's accounts of natural phenomena retrospectively motivate Hume's Dictum, for these accounts (e.g., his repeatedly tweaked counterfactual account of causation, and account of ordinary objects as four-dimensional fusions of three-dimensional fusions of qualitatively characterized points/regions, whose possible states advert to “counterparts” at other concrete possible worlds) are – let's face it – counterintuitive, counterexample-ridden, and/or kludgy. The best case here appeals to Lewis's (1986a) account of modality: if modal claims are made true by goings-on in other concrete possible worlds, then Hume's Dictum serves as a combinatorial generator of the space of possibility not appealing to any irreducible modal notions (including consistency); but that's a big “if”!³ Indeed, Lewis's considered motivation is deflationary: “what I uphold is not so much the truth of Humean supervenience as the *tenability* of it” (1986b, xi). (See Hellie, Chapter 16, this volume, for discussion of the genesis of Lewis's interest in the tenability of Humean supervenience.) But for philosophers aiming to truly illuminate natural reality, that a Humean framework can be held on to, come what may, isn't much motivation for spending one's career vertically exploring its consequences.

So, why have so many taken Hume's Dictum as foundational, given its lack of intuitive, scientific, or philosophical motivation? Plausibly: because Lewis did so. Of course, Lewis's influence wasn't just a matter of his being at Princeton! It also adverts to various attractive characteristics of his

philosophizing. Lewis was clearly a brilliant philosopher. But just as it would have impeded scientific progress for scientists to have joined Ptolemy in adding epicycles to his foundationally flawed system, even had Ptolemy been an especially brilliant and influential person, it has not been good for philosophical progress that so many philosophers have spent decades laboring in the imaginary Legoland of Hume's Dictum.

The scientific comparison suggests another way in which sociological factors may be determinative – namely, as a result of disciplinary inertia. In science, standards are comparatively fixed, not just in that empirical data acts as a constraint, but also in that there are limits to what is considered acceptable as regards interpretation or accommodation of the data: *pace* Quine, the rubber band can stretch, but if it stretches in overly implausible or inelegant directions, that is evidence of the framework's failure, and reason to look for different foundational assumptions. Not so in philosophy, where the lack of fixed standards makes room for individuals and institutions to stick inertially with a framework, epicycles and all.

Barrier #3: Bias

Finally, the absence of fixed standards interferes with philosophical progress in encouraging bias, implicit and/or explicit. For simplicity, I focus on what I call “negative” bias affecting members of the category “woman,” whatever such membership comes to; the following discussion also pertains to members of other bias-disadvantaged categories. The qualifier “negative” reflects the underappreciated fact that bias works not just to unfairly disadvantage members of some demographic categories, but also, in its “positive” form, to unfairly advantage others – especially elite white males.

I start by noting that philosophy has a special problem so far as negative bias against women is concerned. As Schwitzgebel and Jennings recently reported, “the last several decades have seen substantial progress toward gender parity in most disciplines, but philosophy remains strikingly imbalanced in faculty ratios and in citation patterns in leading philosophical journals” (2016). Re the latter patterns: Kieran Healy's (2013) analysis of citation data in philosophy indicates that the work of women – even those at elite institutions, publishing in top journals – is rarely cited or taken up in ways setting philosophical agendas:

[W]omen publish, yet their work is not cited. [...] The 1990s were not the 1950s. And yet essentially *none* of the women from this cohort are cited in the conversation with anything close to the same frequency, despite working in comparable areas, publishing in comparable venues, and even in many cases having jobs at comparable departments.

There is a notable contrast here with closely related fields, such as law and linguistics, where women are commonly acknowledged and appropriately situated leaders.

To be clear: there is no case to be made that this underrepresentation reflects that women are any less philosophically competent (or brilliant!) than their elite white male peers. On the contrary, and with all due respect: as we've just seen, widely cited papers by elite white males may contain basic dialectical and argumentative errors, and the agendas set by elite white males may be almost entirely lacking in either initial or retrospective motivation. Women typically can't get away with blatant dialectical, argumentative, or motivational failings; hence their work is often better than that of their elite male peers along these dimensions, and is moreover often clearly ground-breaking in a way that – if read and engaged with – would produce more substantive results (as with Laurie Paul's (2014) work on transformative experience).

Why does philosophy have a special problem with negative bias against women? This has been unclear, since certain features of philosophy that might initially be seen as explanatory are shared by fields where bias is less of a problem. Yes, philosophy is argumentative; but so is the law. Yes, philosophy is technical, but so is linguistics.

I suggest that the lack of fixed standards in philosophy is the key here. In other argumentative and technical fields, the standards are comparatively fixed: the case is closed, the hypothesis is confirmed. In philosophy, however, our standards consist of a fuzzy and diverse array of methodological principles, along with numerous flexibly ranked and weighted theoretical desiderata.

This difference is deeply explanatory, for studies have shown that flexible contexts of evaluation encourage bias, since in such contexts standards can be unconsciously adjusted to confirm the bias, whether negative or positive. In philosophy, the lack of fixed standards means we are currently *always* in such flexible contexts of assessment, rendering any "result" subject to bias-infected interpretation. No surprise, then, that philosophy is especially prone to bias.

Moving Beyond the Barriers

I close with some brief suggestions about how we can start to move beyond the aforementioned barriers, even prior to the end of methodological inquiry.

To move beyond intra-disciplinary siloing, philosophers should start expanding their purview beyond their preferred or familiar frameworks, in ways manifesting scholarly due diligence. Given that most contemporary work is available online through easily searchable indexes, there's no excuse for ignorance or its propagation.

To move beyond sociological factors being determinative of philosophical attention, philosophers should aim to be clear in their writings and teachings that most frameworks and associated claims are at this point (at best) provisional. Stop pronouncing, y'all! On the other side, graduate students and others need to develop a healthy skepticism as regards dialectical claims – even and especially those made by elite philosophers, who often fail to read outside of narrow citation circles.

As for bias: though “flexible standards” bias can be somewhat counteracted by focusing on specific criteria of assessment, in most philosophical contexts this strategy won't be helpful – too many methodological balls are in play. So I'll instead mention a broadly Buddhist strategy, which starts by acknowledging the bothersome fact of both positive and negative bias. Observe yourself as you are inclined to emit a warm and charitable glow toward the elite white male, and as you are inclined to diss or dismiss that non-elite/non-white/non-male (etc.). Say to yourself, in a benign and self-accepting way: that's not real. Then turn your attention to discerning what the person actually has to say.⁴

Notes

- 1 For criticism of Schaffer's (2016) recent strategies for motivating Grounding, see Wilson (2016).
- 2 Humeans sometimes cite Russell (1912) as establishing that physics doesn't appeal to causal notions – incorrectly, since Russell's remarks are directed only at a specific, implausible “universal generalization” account of causation.
- 3 Even granting the antecedent, the reduction fails; see Wilson (2015).
- 4 Thanks to Russell Blackford, Damien Broderick, Benj Hellie, and Laurie Paul for useful comments.

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