The Scapegoat Theory of Causality

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1.

In the Tractatus, Wittgenstein's position was radically anti-factualist. Hume's influence was evident: the cause-effect relation cannot be observed: belief in the causal nexus is superstition.

But Wittgenstein also embraced the Kantian insight: though there are no causal facts, the logical structure of the world/language is causal, i.e. causality is the only form in which our descriptive systems can be conceived. Natural laws, whether they exist or not, are the grammar of our thoughts and language. Causality is the grammar of science.

At the end of the Philosophical Investigations, however, Wittgenstein throws in a totally original viewpoint, questioning the primacy of grammar in general:

> "If the formation of concepts can be explained in reference to natural facts, then, rather than on grammar, should we not perhaps involve ourselves with what, in nature, grounds it?" PI, XII

> "Compare a concept with a style of painting. Can we just choose it or not? Are we here simply talking of what's pretty and what's ugly?" PI, XII

Indeed, in On Certainty knowledge would finally be characterized as a decision:

> "We do not learn the praxis of empirical judgement by learning rules; we are taught judgements, and their connections to other judgements. We are presented with the plausibility of a totality of judgements". OC, 140

> "My 'state of mind', the "knowing", is for me not a guarantee of what happened. It consists of this: that I would not be able to see where a doubt could arise, where supervision would be possible". OC, 356

> "But here, is it then not shown that knowledge resembles a decision?" OC, 362

The roots of this view are to be sought in Cause and Effect. There Wittgenstein does the background work for his final conception of what "knowing" is. Before ramifying into the world, logical structures germinate from the seeds of action. The way we think matches the morphology of the way we act. Action is decision. To know is to judge. To know with certainty is:

> "When a guy says that he will not recognize any experience as evidence for the contrary; this is no doubt a decision". OC, 368

To know is to pass a verdict. This fits with popular characterizations of reason as a tribunal. What reason does is investigating; but, pace Kant and Tractatus, this is not a logical enterprise. The grammar of the world/language evolves from the practical facts of society. We may, for our convenience, invent many alternative natural histories in order to study concepts: but to know with certainty we must decide and elect only one among them, and not doubt our decision thereafter. A concept is like a style of painting, but we do not choose it on aesthetic grounds: it embodies the evolution of social judgements. This interpretation of PI, XII sees reason as a tribunal, and human practice as the jury.

2.

In CE, Wittgenstein rejects Russell's thesis on causality. To explain why we describe the world as causally structured there is no need to postulate any direct intuitions of causal relations: it is enough to point out that certain statements, describing a first event as the cause of a second, are simply never subjected to criticism. The linguistic game of causality does not start with a doubt. However, to consider causal statements as "beyond doubt" does not amount to their being transcendentally grounded (contra Kant); nor (contra Russell) to their being intuitions, as when I am hit with a stick, experience pain, and intuitively know that the blow caused the pain.

The experience of pain is one we may genuinely call "experience of a cause", says Wittgenstein. But not because we are directly and unmistakably made aware of a specific cause. There could be endless possible alternative causes for the pain: while the blow may only have the function of giving me the impression of touch, pain could actually be exploding inside me (a micro-bomb, previously inoculated).

Causal propositions are beyond doubt not because they are solidly grounded on a priori categories or intuitions, but because their being grounded at all is not even in question. I cannot be certain about any specific cause: but I must (I want to) be certain about there being a cause in general. Not to question certain things is a practical methodology.

In CE, Wittgenstein constructs an elegant Gedankexperiment to show how we come to speak of causes:

> two plants, a rose and a poppy. I am led to think that the macro-differences I see between them correspond to micro-differences in their seeds' biological compositions. Different seeds cause different plants: I doubt not that fine-grained genetic inspections would find the seeds to differ in some respect. This is the medieval doctrine that all the "perfections" of the effect already be present in the cause: the "pipeline" conception of causality (Martin, 2008).

Wittgenstein proposes to block the pipeline: suppose the seeds are found to be identical. How to explain the rose and the poppy being two different plants? We would not know what to think, quite literally. Now suppose we finally do find a difference, perhaps at the quark level. Wittgenstein still asks us to prove that such micro-difference is the pertinent one, so that the macro-difference between the two plants does not merely correspond to, but is causally determined by, the micro-one. We cannot be certain of that, and neither Kant nor Russell can help, at this point. We may keep on searching desperately (CE, App.1); or we may simply proclaim a cause.

> "… We also speak of 'tracking the cause': in a simple case we follow, so to speak, the rope, to see

> who's pulling it. When we find such individual – how do we know that it is him, his pulling, the cause of the fact that the rope is moving? Do we establish that through a series of experiments?" CE, p. 15.10

We don't. The main point of the causality issue is that, when something happens we look for (what we call) the cause of it. At the root of the grammar of causality are not scientific facts, logical categories, or direct intuitions. There is action: there are acts of investigation. Investigation is not modelled on science, but vice-versa. The search for causes is a non-scientific, eminently practical activity. We react to the cause, our eyes running from one thing to another:

> "… to call something a 'cause' is like pointing to someone and say "He did it!" CE, 24.9

> "He who follows the rope and finds who's pulling can take a further step, and conclude: so this was the cause, - or rather, is it not the case that all he wanted to find was whether someone was pulling, and who?"CE, 16.10

3.

The practice of scapegoating is anthropologically ubiquitous. The individuation of scapegoats is not an experimental, much less a logical enterprise. The chain between the scapegoat and the misfortune it is said to have caused does not need to be spelled out scientifically. All that matters is that someone did it: if that is the case, then something can be done back.

> "In one case 'he is the cause' simply means: he pulled the rope. In other cases it means something like: these are the facts that I must change in order to eliminate this phenomenon … But how do I get to the idea of changing a circumstance in order to eliminate a phenomenon? ... Yes, it may be said that this presupposes that I am looking for a cause, that from a phenomenon I go look for another". CE, p.20

The search for a cause is a human reaction to the social facts of existence. We do not observe causal relations, we do not project causality onto the world, nor do we experience it intuitively. These are chit-chats (CE, 22.10). We proclaim it.

> "… In alternative to what? Certainly to never pull the strings, always remaining uncertain about what really is the cause of the phenomenon; as if it made sense to say: strictly speaking it is impossible to know with certainty, so that what would come closer to the truth would be to leave the question open. This idea is based on a total misunderstanding of the roles that pertain to exactness and doubt" CE, 21.10

> "The simple form (and this is the primitive form) of the game of cause and effect is the determination of the cause, not the doubt" CE, 21.10

The primitive form of the causality game is the hunt for a scapegoat, guilty of all bad, even and especially when the trajectory of emergence of such bad is un-reconstruct-able. The proclamation needs not be substantiated scientifically – all is needed is that the general mechanism not be questioned.

In CE, the genealogical argument starts with an inspection of the grammar of doubt: linguistic games in which we doubt (that something is the cause of something else) originate as complications of simpler games, in which there is no doubt.

I now submit that Wittgenstein's position is best made sense of by an evolutionary interpretation.

4.

The evolutionary position has it that some functions of our mind, which philosophers, struck by their pervasiveness, have hypostasized as transcendental categories, or direct intuitions, are indeed specializations that have evolved in response to social situations humans have found themselves in during their history as a species.

Such hypothesis was explored by Cosmides and Tooby (1992), who maintained that problems we find confusing when expressed in naked logical terms become very clear when coated in social ones — we score high at logical inference if the latter refers to contexts of interaction: and those are the contexts faced by our ancestors when establishing patterns of socio-economic connection. Our mind has evolved a specialized capacity to tackle socially significant problems, such as individuating those who defect from covenants.

When confronted with social problems, a specialized mental mechanism moves our eyes from one thing to another. Thousands of years of social negotiation have equipped us with a somewhat automatic drive to look for, and ability to find, who's pulling the rope.

Now, keeping all that in mind, as well as our brief discussion on scapegoating and Wittgenstein's Gedankexperiment, consider the following statement:

> "… If I say: history cannot be the cause of development, that does not mean that I cannot foresee development starting from history, for this is precisely what I do; but it means that I do not call this a 'causal connection', that this is not about predicting the effect from the cause.

> To say: 'There must be a difference in the seeds, even if we cannot find it, plainly displays how powerful it is within us the impulse to see everything through the scheme of cause and effect … 'there must be', that is: we want to use this image in any case". CE, 26.9

Causality in the scientific sense means predicting the effect from its cause. In evolutionary, genealogical, Wittgensteinian sense, it means tracking the cause from its effects. This is the scapegoat theory of causality.

When the group is hit by misfortune, the linguistic game of explanation is enacted in causal terms, with reference to a violation of social trust, which in turn implies a violation of the group's covenant with its natural context, which explains the misfortune. The mysterious cause of nature's operations is thus searched for and individuated within the group. The elimination of the guilty scapegoat is a necessary and sufficient condition for the continuation of social life. But what is important is that the causal chain linking the scapegoat to misfortune actually runs the other way: from misfortune to scapegoat. The cause can only be genealogically reconstructed: before they break the social covenant, community members are, as members, indistinguishable, just like the two seeds in the Gedankexperiment. In both cases, the inability to predict effects is ubiquitous: the grammar of a genuinely causal explanation in the scientific sense has no application.

We may have evolved a specialized capacity to detect defectors from covenants, which has later been adapted by our minds to other kinds of operations, such as scientific investigation. The seed of the causality game is not in the world, in our speculative intellect, or in our intuitions: it is in the realm of social action. Investigation is not modelled on science, but vice-versa.

5.

The scapegoat theory of causality implies, contra Hume, that effects (misfortunes; different plants) are in the past: from past facts we extrapolate causes, and it is thus causes that, properly speaking, follow effects. In his critique, Hume chronologically ordains effects and causes the other way, himself operating a first, and crucial, rationalization, which misleads him into considering causality a theoretical, not a practical, problem.

Kant does not question Hume's formulation. Transcendentalism imputes the pervasiveness of causal extrapolations to a priori, immutable categories of the intellect. Wittgenstein does not abandon the Kantian idea of world-descriptions being only conceivable in causal terms, but he rejects the claim that this is so because there are immutable logical categories underlying the world/language. While Kant sees causality as a universal category of our descriptions, Wittgenstein sees it as a fact about our descriptions, genealogically traceable to the practice of linguistic games more akin to scapegoating than to science. To verbalize such games in cognitive terms conceals their origins as social activities. Pace Kant, causality is not a cognitive lamp with which rational beings illuminate the world. It is an unspoken presupposition that circumscribes the linguistic activity of men within circumstances that are primarily social. Such presupposition is not transcendental: indeed it is not conceptual at all, it is eminently practical (reactive + adaptive).

> "Knowledge is interesting only within a game".
> CE, 18.10

Finally, the directness of Russell's intuition finds no expression in a linguistic game:

> "To 'intuitively recognize the cause' means: to know it in some way (to experience it in a non-usual way) ... Is he not then in a situation no different from that of one who correctly guesses the cause?"
> CE, 18.10

> "We can of course imagine someone saying, in the bliss of inspiration, that he now knows the cause: but that does not preclude us from checking whether he knows the right thing." CE, 18.10

Checking from within the linguistic game of causality we play.

Intuitionism misleads us out of this game. The latter is the not-primarily-scientific one of social adaptation: a way to know causes that has no role within such game is "not interesting". Much more interesting are the words of a medicine man pointing at the scapegoat to explain the mysteries of nature.

We have no intuition of causality as if it existed apart from the use we make of it in linguistic games. The scapegoat theory describes the game of causality as that of finding a cause in any case. This implies an active search for it, accompanied by a non-scientific trust in its existence.

6.

In line with Wittgenstein, an evolutionary interpretation suggests that the use of the causality relation within linguistic games responds to adaptive requirements, primarily social, so strong as to account for both the dimensions of "universality" and "instinctive-ness" that transcendentalism and intuitionism, respectively, wished to capture.

We trust it that there is a cause for every effect, much like primitive groups trust it that there is a scapegoat for every misfortune. The game played is similar, and does not involve "knowing".

> "They tell me that in these circumstances this thing happens. They discovered it by checking a few times ... In the end, I trust those experiences, or their reports, and in conformity with those I orient, unscrupulously, my actions. But this trust, has it not performed well? For all I can see – yes". OC, 603