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Editors
PAUL WEINGARTNER
GERHARD SCHURZ
GEORG DORN

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DIE ROLLE DER PRAGMATIK
IN DER GEGENWARTS PHILOSOPHIE

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Herausgeber
PAUL WEINGARTNER
GERHARD SCHURZ
GEORG DORN

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EXPLANATION VERSUS ARGUMENT, CAUSE VERSUS REASON, AND THEIRLINGUISTIC CORRELATES

I. Explanation versus argument

F. von Kutschera (1972) makes the following distinction between what he calls an 'epistemic argument' ("epistemische Begründung") and a 'causal argument' ("kausale Begründung"):  

Wenn eine Begründung dazu dient, zu zeigen, daß der zu begründende Satz B wahr oder wahrscheinlich ist, sprechen wir von einer epistemischen Begründung. Die angegebenen Gründe A_1, ..., A_n dienen dann als Erkenntnisgründe (causae cognoscendi) [...]. (p. 366)

Wenn bereits bekannt ist, daß der zu begründende Satz B wahr ist, wenn es bei der Begründung also nicht darum geht, ihn als wahr oder wahrscheinlich zu erweisen, dann sprechen wir von einer kausalen Begründung, falls die Begründung zum Ziel hat, deutlich zu machen, warum das durch B ausgedrückte Ereignis eintritt. Die begründenden Sätze A_1, ..., A_n dienen dann als Seinsgründe (causae efficientes) und stellen Ursachen für den zu begründenden Sachverhalt dar. (p. 367)

Von Kutschera points out (ib.) that what he refers to as causal argument is also termed explanation. The latter is the term that I will employ in the following, and I will simply use argument instead of epistemic argument. (Of course there are other meanings of explanation than von Kutschera's causal argument, but these will not concern us here.)

The distinction between explanation and argument made above is rooted in a difference regarding the discourse status of the truth of the assertion that is to be explained or argued for. With an explanation, the truth of this assertion is presupposed; it is not presupposed with an argument. (I exclude from discussion the case of an epistemic argument for a probably true sentence B, but nothing hinges on this exclusion.) I want to re-interpret the notion of 'presupposing the truth of an assertion' in terms of the knowledge a text-producer thereby implies and intends to use within the respective discourse: Presupposing the truth of an assertion is equivalent in meaning to implying pre-established knowledge of the factuality of the state-of-affairs which is being asserted. By 'pre-established' I mean 'established prior to the moment of uttering the explanation'. The source of this knowledge may lie in the encyclopedic background knowledge, or in the pool of information that the discourse situation offers (i.e. contextual information), or in the pool of information established within the discourse prior to the respective assertion (i.e. that part of the co-text which is the pre-text). Not presupposing the truth of an assertion
2. Cause versus reason

According to J. Lyons (1977),

Causes [...] are second-order entities. Reasons, however, being propositional in nature are third-order entities. (p. 493)

By second-order entities we shall mean events, processes, state-of-affairs, etc., which are located in time and which, in English, are said to occur or take place, rather than to exist; and by third-order entities we shall mean such abstract entities as propositions, which are outside space and time. (p. 443)

Whereas second-order entities are observable and, unless they are instantaneous events, have a temporal duration, third-order entities are unobservable and cannot be said to occur or to be located either in space or time. (p. 445)

This distinction corresponds to that between the 'subjective' and the 'objective' concept of causality made by R. Spaemann (1989/1994), if explicated from a completely different perspective:

[subjective:] Die Erfahrung des Bewirkens ist fundamental und auf nichts Fundamentales reduzierbar. Sie ist das Paradigma aller Kausalitätsvorstellungen des Common sense und der auf die Antike zurückgehenden philosophischen Tradition. Ein Ding wirkt auf ein anderes Ding und bewirkt in ihm Veränderungen, so, wie wir auf andere Dinge wirken und dabei übrigens auch deren Widerständigkeit und Rückwirkung erfahren. [...] auch dort, wo wir selbst nur Beobachter sind, [werden] Kausalzusammenhänge wie z.B. Schleudern, Schieben, Ziehen usw. unmittelbar wahrgenommen [...], und zwar ohne daß dabei der Gedanke einer gesetzmäßigen Verknüpfung eine Rolle spielt. (p. 162)

[...] [objective:] Das zweite Paradigma, das zur sukzessiven Eliminierung des Kausalitätsbegriffs führt, ergibt sich aus der programmatischen Reduktion der Welt auf einen 'objektiven', subjektklosen, kontinuierlichen Prozeß, dessen verschiedene Stadien in funktionale

3. The relation between 'explanation versus argument' and 'cause versus reason'

There is an asymmetrical relation between the distinctions of 'explanation versus argument' on the one hand and 'cause versus reason' on the other. Giving a reason may serve either as explanation or argument, for it is possible that a reason entails the truth of an utterance stating the factuality of a state-of-affairs of which one has pre-established knowledge or of which one has no such knowledge. For example, assume there is a law saying that water freezes, under certain conditions, if kept below 0°C. Now the following two situations are imaginable: i) Person A, who knows the law just mentioned, hears truly from person B that B has kept water below 0°C under the conditions specified by the law. Person A may now advance as a reason that 'B has kept water below 0°C under those condition' to support his assertion that 'the water in question is frozen' without having pre-established
knowledge, from other sources than his knowledge of the law and the information truly conveyed to him by B, of this state-of-affairs. ii) Person A, who knows the law just mentioned, has seen person B keeping water below 0°C under the conditions specified by the law and sees that water frozen. Again person A may now advance as a reason that ‘B has kept water below 0°C under those conditions’ to support his statement that ‘the water in question is frozen’; but in this situation he has pre-established knowledge of the factuality of this state-of-affairs from his sense experiences. Mentioning a cause, however, requires pre-established knowledge of the effect. A cause manifests itself only in producing or preventing a change in a state-of-affairs (see e.g. Spaemann 1989/1994 quoted above, Ducasse 1951). You have to know about an effect in order to have the idea of attributing a cause to it. Cause and effect are inseparably intertwined in this concept of ‘subjective causality’. Of course, there are predictions and prophecies, but these can only be derived on the basis of laws, i.e. non-logically (or ‘folk-nomologically’). This means that an assertion which serves as basis for another, predictive (or prophetic) assertion is a reason. On the assumption that there are no other possibilities of explaining and arguing than mentioning causes or reasons, it follows that an explanation may be either realized by mentioning a cause or a reason, and that an argument may only be realized by mentioning a reason.

4. Linguistic correlates of ‘cause versus reason’ and ‘explanation versus argument’

Consider the following observation by A. Davison (1970, 198):

I do not know exactly how because differs semantically from since and as, but I would like to note sentences in which since does not mean the same thing as because:

[(1)] Because John is a Republican, I proved that his friends are Republicans too.

[(2)] Since John is a Republican, I proved that his friends are Republicans too.

The because clause in (1) states my motivation for constructing such a proof, while the since clause states my basis for a proof, assuming the axiom of Guilt by Association to allow me to arrive at my conclusion [...].

I think I am not too wide of the mark in maintaining that the expression "motivation for constructing such a proof" rather refers to a cause, the driving force behind the action – mind also the etymology of the word ‘motivation’ – while the explanation of the meaning of the since-clause refers to a reason (the axiom of Guilt by Association being a kind of law used to derive a conclusion by a syllogistic procedure). Furthermore I hypothesize that Davison’s intuition concerning the semantic difference between because on the one hand and causal as and since on the other hand is shared by many (native) speakers of English – not only with respect to this

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1 Prophecies may perhaps be said to be based on ‘laws’ other than ‘scientific laws’, e.g. ‘folk-laws’ such as can be found in popular wisdom.

Example, but rather as a general tendency. This hypothesis may find support in a result I obtained by investigating a one million word corpus of Modern English texts and text-extracts distributed over 15 different text-categories (see Breul (to appear)): The share of causal as- and, especially, since-clauses is significantly higher than the average in academic writing, i.e. in a text-category that is especially concerned with models of and theories about the world, with the (scientific) laws that are operative in the world, with arguing and explaining by putting forward reasons; because-clauses are significantly less frequent in these texts than on average. (In fact, this tendency is even more pronounced in the mathematics/natural sciences subcategories.)

If my explication of the relation between ‘cause versus reason’ and ‘explanation versus argument’ as established in the previous section is adequate, and if my hypothesis about the representation of a cause-effect relation by Davison’s sentence (1) and the manifestation of a reason-consequence relation by her sentence (2) is correct, then there should also be a definite distribution of what may and may not be presupposed to be true in a discourse situation where (1) and (2) are uttered. The desired result is exactly borne out: In (1), the cause-case, the fact that the speaker has proved John’s friends to be Republicans is presupposed to be true; the speaker considers himself to already know that he has proved John’s friends to be Republicans (explanation). In others words: You can only experience a motivation for a certain state-of-mind (such as believing to have constructed a proof or intending to construct a proof) after you have experienced that respective state-of-mind. In (2), the reason-case, the speaker may or may not presuppose to be true that he has proved John’s friends to be Republicans (explanation or argument). He may present his conclusion as if having deduced it precisely on the grounds of the statement manifested by the since-clause in (2), without any implied claim about pre-established knowledge of his having proved John’s friends to be Republicans (argument); or he may put forward an explaining reason for something he has known in advance, from one of the sources mentioned in section 1. In other words: The procedure for arriving at the conclusion that the speaker has proved John’s friends to be Republicans may be put to work in the discourse precisely at the moment of uttering (2), so that this conclusion appears to represent a newly established fact within the discourse. Or the procedure is put to work retrospectively in order to rationalize a statement representing a state-of-affairs that has already been taken to be a known fact.

I think that for those text-producers who make a distinction between using because and ‘causal’ (as is the traditional grammatical term) since or as, it is between causes and reasons in the senses introduced above. Consequently, the difficulties in explicating the differences in meaning between because-clauses and ‘causal’ since- and as-clauses – and the fact that often there appears to be no difference – are rooted in the conceptually rather subtle distinction between causes and reason and the intertwined character of their relation from an ontological and
epistemological point of view.

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