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**Description of *Hunting Causes and Using Them: Approaches in Philosophy and Economics***

**For Analysis Reviews**

*Hunting Causes and Using Them: Approaches in Philosophy and Economics* (*HC&UT*) is about notions of causality appropriate to the sciences, mostly generic causal claims (causal laws), and especially notions that connect causality with probability.<sup>1</sup> Most of the work for the book is associated with the project ‘Causality: Metaphysics and Methods’. This project argued that metaphysics – our account of what causal laws are or what general causal claims say – should march hand-in-hand with our ways of establishing them. It should be apparent, given the kind of thing we think causality is, why our methods are good for finding it. If our metaphysics does not mesh with and underwrite the methods we are willing to trust, we should be wary of both.

Many philosophers nowadays look for a single informative feature that characterizes causal laws. *HC&UT* argues instead for causal pluralism, for a large variety of kinds of causal laws as well as purposes for which we call scientific claims causal. Correlatively different methods for testing causal claims are suited to different kinds of causal laws. No one analysis is privileged and no methods are universally applicable. Much of the argument for pluralism is provided by authors of different accounts of causality, who provide intuitively plausible counterexamples to each other. Still, most of these accounts seem adequate for the kinds of examples the authors focus on. From the point of view of *HC&UT* these examples involve different kinds of causal laws or set causality to different jobs, and the concomitant characterizing feature marks out this one kind of causal law.

Importantly for the argument, often we can specify what characteristics a system of laws should have in order for an account/method pair to be applicable. An example is James Woodward’s *level invariance*, which I see as a test but which he offers as a characterizing criterion.<sup>2</sup> Woodward argues by example: He shows that many noncausal associations are not level invariant. *HC&UT* goes further. It proves that for a system of causal laws that satisfy a number of familiar conditions, level invariance is sufficient for causality. The conditions include the requirements that causal laws be expressible as linear equations with dependent variable as effect and independent variables as causes (hence causality in this sense is deterministic and the effects of separate causes add); that causality be asymmetric and irreflexive; and that any true association among the quantities in the system can be derived from the causal laws. So level invariance is a provably good criterion for a special kind of system of causal laws and it can further underwrite a closely associated test. But neither the analysis nor the test are appropriate where causes act indeterministically, where true lawlike associations can hold without a causal base (perhaps conservation laws are like this), where causation is cyclical or where linearity fails.

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<sup>1</sup> Sadly it thus short-changes other important scientifically relevant accounts, most notably process and activity theories, in favour of those I have more expertise with.

<sup>2</sup> Roughly, a linear equation is level invariant if it holds under surgical substitution (that is, changes made in much the way required in Lewis’s counterfactual account of causality) of different values for right-hand-side variables. Cf. Woodward (2003).

Another case are ‘causal Bayes-nets’, which are characterized by three axioms. Algorithms derived from these axioms can produce every causal graph consistent with given probabilistic information, hence providing powerful methods for hunting causes. Given the axioms it is also possible to predict how changes in probability will propagate across the system if the probability of one quantity is changed surgically.<sup>3</sup> This can be extremely useful if ever we envisage making these kinds of changes. But the methods both for testing and for prediction are only appropriate where the axioms hold.

*HC&UT* looks at cases where these axioms might fail. For example, the ‘faithfulness’ axiom says that causes and effects are probabilistically dependent. But systems are often designed so that a cause’s ineliminable positive contribution to an unwanted outcome is cancelled by its negative contribution. The ‘causal Markov condition’ says that two factors not related as cause and effect must be probabilistically independent once the causal parents of one are conditioned on. This can fail when probabilistic causes produce their effects in tandem, in populations with so-called ‘selection bias’, when two unrelated quantities each change monotonically in time, etc.

Bayes-nets experts are naturally working hard to extend the methods to deal with cases like these. But the point here is the lesson about pluralism and about the match of methods to kinds of causal laws. There is no reason to suppose that it is in the nature of causality that a probabilistic cause produce its effects independently of each other (rather than in tandem) nor that properly caused quantities not share time trends nor that positive and negative contributions to the same outcome from the same cause not cancel. The three axioms provide criteria not for something to be a causal law but for one kind of causal law, with matched methods for finding causal laws and using them. In the same vein my axioms pick out laws for which Woodward’s level invariance is an appropriate criterion for causality and a sound basis for testing.

A third example is manipulationist accounts. Woodward and Daniel Hausman take invariance under (surgical) manipulation to be the key criterion for causal laws<sup>4</sup>. In a series of heroic efforts to establish unity among causal notions they tried to show that the causal Markov condition so important for Bayes nets can be derived from this. Two chapters of *HC&UT* show that these efforts fail.

At any rate, surgical interventions have little application. *HC&UT* looks at two further manipulationist accounts that can do real predictive work. Econometrician David Hendry takes causal laws to tell what happens under a *proposed* set of interventions.<sup>5</sup> These laws license what chapter III.6 calls ‘implementation-specific counterfactuals’. The second account, which I attribute to economic methodologist Kevin Hoover,<sup>6</sup> takes causal laws to tell what happens under all intervention possible for us, which license ‘implementation-neutral counterfactuals’.

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<sup>3</sup> This involves leaving all causal laws intact except those producing the changed quantity plus supposing that what I have elsewhere called ‘the strength of a cause’s capacity’ (measured by a particular partial conditional probability) stays the same for all causes. See Cartwright (1989).

<sup>4</sup> See Hausman (1992).

<sup>5</sup> Hendry (2001).

<sup>6</sup> I take my interpretation from what I think is a literal reading of Hoover’s definitions and it produces what I think to be an excellent and exciting account of causation. Hoover however sometimes seems to want his account instead to capture what I call ‘mechanical’ causation. See Hoover (2001).

These geared-to-usage manipulationist accounts show how deeply causal pluralism cuts. *HC&UT* describes a machine where mechanical and manipulationist criteria dictate back-to-front results: A causes B on the mechanical account; the reverse on a manipulationist. Yet mechanism and manipulation are both central to our thinking about causality.<sup>7</sup>

The last chapter of *HC&UT*, from research done jointly with Julian Reiss, focuses on action-guiding counterfactuals, especially as treated in economics, which is different in interesting ways from work familiar in our own field. I echo the standard advice to evaluate counterfactuals from a ‘causal model’, but a model that represents the causes and causal laws that obtain *post*-intervention since interventions typically change causes other than the targeted one and not unusually change the causal laws at work as well.<sup>8</sup> This advice is all to the good. EXCEPT: Our methods for hunting causal laws, as well as concomitant accounts of what causal laws are, are almost all suited for establishing pre-intervention models, not for constructing models of what causes and causal laws obtain post-intervention, which is a more creative, less rule-governed enterprise.

When this problem became clearly visible, near the end of the project that spawned *HC&UT*, I realized that it is not enough to match metaphysics and method. Use must mesh with these two as well. Knowledge of causal laws should gain us something; it should empower us to do things, make new inferences and make new outcomes. But how do we know that what has been warranted by our tests for causal laws will in turn warrant the inferences we want to draw from them? Normally it should be metaphysics that does this job: We can see from our account of what causal laws are both why our methods are good for testing them and why our inference from them are justified. Available accounts of causal laws, even when restricted to specific kinds of causal laws or specific purposes, are too close to either hunting or using to do this job. They are almost read off from either a favoured method for testing causal claims or a favoured use to which they might be put. So *HC&UT* ends on a despairing note. Despite all the hard work already done, we still need richer, more detailed theories of causal laws if we are to justify using the causal knowledge we pay so dearly to gain.

### Comments on Longworth and Weber discussion

As Francis Longworth discusses, *HC&UT* argues that there is no such thing as *the* causal relation nor a handful of causal relations nor even a truck load. Rather, there is only a seemingly endless array of relations, called ‘thick’ relations in the book, that

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<sup>7</sup> Some people feel that the manipulationist causal laws hold only ‘on account of’ the mechanical ones. I am not at all sure we can make sense of this ‘on account of’; but even if we can, I don’t see how it privileges one over the other as an account of what a causal law is. (Of course on my view it should make sense to say that they all hold on account of thick causal relations.)

<sup>8</sup> They often do so by disturbing the underlying structure that gives rise to those laws, as when I press too hard on the lever in my toaster and it no longer triggers the heating element to produce browning as I expect.

may be loosely grouped under the label ‘causal’, with a vast variety of different clusterings for different purposes. So I do not see Hitchcock’s question as posing an objection. Once we have served our purpose by labelling a relation ‘causal’, there may well be nothing added, helpful to this purpose, by noting further that the relation is one of feeding gasoline to the carburettor rather than, say, stuffing it in or making it available. For instance, if our purpose is to predict how probabilistic changes propagate across a set of quantities supposing the probability of one is changed ‘surgically’, this purpose is served once we can point to the probability-change-making relations among these quantities and label them as ‘causal’ in the Bayes-nets sense.

My purpose in labelling a very great many relations as ‘causal’ is to counter current-day ‘Humeans’, like David Lewis, John Earman and Bas van Fraassen. These philosophers are enamoured of some one or another special set of features in nature, features that are conceived of as ‘inert’, ‘non-active’, ‘temporally and spatially local’ or whatever. A great many features I see around me – and that appear to be essential in every successful scientific intervention I have studied – are missing from their special sets. These philosophers – the ‘Humeans’ – are the ones who make the causal/non-causal distinction, with their favoured concepts labelled ‘non-causal’. In maintaining that pushing, pinching, compressing, repelling, attracting and so forth are causal, I imply that these are not among the favoured sets of the Humeans and they are not reducible to features in these sets. And of course I also maintain that they are every bit as much in the world, and play as great a role in real science, as the ‘non-causal’ features the Humeans admire.

So, thick descriptions of relations labelled ‘causal’ need not be causal-content increasing. Indeed they can be causal-content decreasing. Consider ‘the pesticide smothers eel worms’, which is a possible thick description for an arrow in a causal-Bayes-net of Judea Pearl representing ‘the pesticide causes eelworm death’. The arrow is appropriate only if smothering is part of a set of relations that together satisfy the Bayes-nets axioms. But being part of such a set is not implied by ‘smothers’. This fact may make trouble for Longworth’s own proposal, assuming, as I would, that being correctly representable by a causal-Bayes-net arrow should be among Longworth’s right-hand-side disjuncts.

I hope that Longworth can steer around this kind of problem, however, because the scheme he offers can make causality a far more useful concept than I fear it to be. Consider: If thick descriptions are not composites of ‘causes’ plus some non-causal description there may well be criteria for the application of the thick label that don’t include the characterizing features pointed to in labelling the relation ‘causal’. If in turn the thick description implies these features, we then have an independent way to identify when these features obtain. This is a powerful tool. Consider for instance how useful it would be to have independently accessible criteria for when a set of relations satisfies the Bayes-nets axioms or transmits a mark or reliably produces a targeted outcome.

The possibility of inferring from thick descriptions to ‘causes’ is independent of the other half of Longworth’s scheme, which takes causality to be analysable as a (possibly very long) disjunction. Here I have a weaker view: Family resemblance is

the best we can hope for.<sup>9</sup> Nor do I see why we need the stronger claim. If the upward implications from thick descriptions to features characterizing causal laws work, Longworth's answer to Hitchcock goes through whether or not a proper 'if-and-only-if' can be provided. And, as I just argued, the upwards implications would be a boon whether or not Hitchcock's question raises problems for my claims about thick relations.

With respect to 'if and only if', I think there's no point in doing it unless it can be done properly. There I'm sceptical. Hall's two concepts are not two concepts but two loose groupings, as are the labels in Longworth's (DTC<sub>1</sub>). Consider just the probabilistic theory of causality. *HC&UT* argues that the correct expression of it depends on the exact form of the causal-probabilistic laws at work as well as a variety of facts about the population. Nor should this be surprising. Causation is a concept from ordinary life – what Otto Neurath called a 'ballungen' concept:<sup>10</sup> a vague, rough-edged congestion of ideas and criteria that serves a lot of different purposes at once and often none of them very precisely. As Stuart Hampshire maintained, such concepts should not be subject to more rigour than they can bear.

Yet to figure in science they must be rigorous. Even narrowing consideration to scientific contexts, though, I would not expect 'if-and-only-if' to be possible. As Sophia Efstathiou stresses,<sup>11</sup> when ordinary concepts are brought into science they get transformed and transformed into concepts that do different but very specific jobs in different sciences in different ways. Quantum field theory requires a different concept of causation than bicycle makers do, which is different again from concepts needed in various social sciences. Even within economics a number of different concepts are available, and useful, as *HC&UT* illustrates. There's no reason to think that this array of scientifically-transformed causal concepts is finite or fixed or has any system to it.

As to Weber's comments, I agree with all, except his interpretation of me and his enthusiasm for IARC. I am less enthusiastic not because I advocate less diversity, but more. My distinction between methods that clinch conclusions and those that merely vouch for them is part of a larger study of evidence-ranking and conclusion-grading schemes.<sup>12</sup> There is now an array of these, all looking much like IARC's, though often less nuanced. I argue that we need accounts of 1)the quality of evidence – how likely is the evidence claim to be true, 2)relevance – in what ways and how strongly does it bear on the conclusion, and 3)how to evaluate conclusions in light of all evidence. Most guides focus on 1), ignore 2)<sup>13</sup> and give flawed advice about 3).

In IARC we see 1) in the assessment of individual studies ("Each [epidemiological] study is assessed according to three criteria..."; for experimental animals,

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<sup>9</sup> Hence I don't really hold with Longworth's interpretation (iii) of me.

<sup>10</sup> For further discussion of this see Cartwright, Cat, Fleck and Uebel (1996).

<sup>11</sup> See Efstathiou (2009) on what she calls 'founded' concepts.

<sup>12</sup> See my website (<http://personal.lse.ac.uk/cartwrig/Default.htm>) for my own papers on these topics and references therein to others.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, relevance, as opposed to quality and methods for drawing overall conclusions, is not explicitly addressed in the IARC scheme. But looking at the scheme, as Weber describes it, it appears that the relevance of positive epidemiological results on *some* human population to 'is carcinogenic to humans' is taken for granted (I think fallaciously), whereas the relevance of animal results requires a hypothesis about shared mechanisms.

“Conclusion (1) is drawn if there are *high quality* studies...”).<sup>14</sup> 3) is done in two steps: First assign *sufficient, limited, inadequate* or *lack* labels for each of the three categories (epidemiological, animal studies, mechanistic); second, draw the conclusion labelled ‘group x’ according to the rules Weber sketches. So we can conclude “carcinogenic to humans” if there is sufficient epidemiological evidence for carcinogenicity in humans and we can conclude this if “a positive relationship has been observed in studies in which chance, bias and confounding could be ruled out with reasonable confidence.” Thus unbiased, etc. epidemiological studies trump the rest: Positive results from these yield a positive conclusion even if evidence from the other modes is inadequate or negative.

Why? The only sensible reason I have come up with is that of chapter I.3: These unbiased (etc.) studies are **clinchers** – *given the background assumptions*,<sup>15</sup> a probabilistic difference in the occurrence of cancer between exposed and unexposed groups deductively implies that the agent caused cancer in the study population.<sup>16</sup> The importance of discussing clinching is not, as Weber suggests, to argue that a single study is sufficient but the reverse. Why prefer these studies? ‘Because they are unbiased (etc.)’. What’s so good about that? In the end, I take it, the answer is that lack of bias (etc.) is enough to guarantee the conclusion. But now it is hard to see why these studies trump others. Deductive conclusions are only as sure as their premises. Premises are never certain.<sup>17</sup> So the conclusions aren’t either. We give a good shot at ensuring the premises. But why have more confidence that we have succeeded than we have in arguments that may have equally – or even more – secure premises but not such a tight fit between premises and conclusion? From this perspective the most sensible procedure seems to be to look at all the studies together and give an overall evaluation, as best possible, not to suppose that following a recipe to reduce bias (etc) will always produce more reliable results than studies that rely on mechanisms or animal models or even statistical studies with some bias.

Weber also takes my connection between types of systems or types of conclusions on the one hand and types of evidence on the other to suggest conclusions be drawn from one type of study alone. In a sense I maintain the reverse. All methods require background assumptions; when the assumptions fail, the methods cannot be taken to be reliable. Yet we often cannot tell whether the assumptions are met or not. It is good practice then to multiply studies in order to control for error in assumptions, and in the end to make an overall judgment based on the pattern of results.

Beware though. The reliability of method depends on the type of conclusion drawn. So Weber’s concern that differentiating kinds of conclusions, as I insist we must, restricts the methods we can use to test them, is a correct one. Indeed it is one of the central lessons I urge, and one of great practical significance. We need to be clear about *exactly what kind of causal conclusion* we are entitled to draw from our studies;

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<sup>14</sup> IARC (2006).

<sup>15</sup> Including common assumptions about the relation between causes and probabilities as well as the context-local assumptions that the two groups have the same distribution of other causally relevant features (unbiased) and that there is a genuine probabilistic difference in outcome (the difference in frequency is not a result of chance).

<sup>16</sup> That’s because, given the assumptions, the only possible explanation for the difference is that the agent caused cancers in some members of the exposed population.

<sup>17</sup> Including the broad metaphysical premise required in these arguments, which I discuss in *HC&UT*, that every probabilistic difference requires a causal explanation.

and not out of philosophical purity but because the inferences we can go on to draw as we imbed that conclusion in other contexts, combining it with other knowledge, depend intimately on what causal claim we have established in the first place. Indeed, this is one of my worries about current causal investigations in the biomedical and social sciences: They are often sloppy about what the causal conclusion drawn claims.<sup>18</sup>

What then of the scatter of methods Weber describes from IARC – epidemiological studies, studies on model animals, studies of mechanisms? These can properly be used in a complex inference to establish not causal laws (which in my account are always population-specific) but more abstract capacity claims: claims about a stable contribution the cause can make. It is a complicated story about what is involved in a capacity claim and how such claims can be justified.<sup>19</sup> But epidemiological methods and studies of mechanisms can play an important role.

Finally, Weber urges attention to simulations and experiments in economics. We are again here in agreement: This is an important topic. I discuss only thought experiments, in a chapter on ‘idealized’ models, though many of the cautions about ‘overconstraining’ restrictions in the set-ups apply to actual experiments as well. Other than that, I leave experiments and simulations to other colleagues, including Weber himself, who have more interesting things to say than I would.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Sometimes this is ‘remedied’ by reporting precise statistical results. This can be an even worse practice since these results are often only useful when interpreted causally – and that is the interpretation they are given. But in this case the causal interpretation, being less explicit, is even less rigorously reviewed.

<sup>19</sup> For further discussion see Cartwright (2007) and (1989) and articles on my website on causal powers.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Guala (2005), Alexandrova (2006), (2007); Gruene-Yanoff (2006); Humphreys (2009); Reiss (2007), Morgan (2001).

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