

CAUSALITY AND UNAMENDABLENESS

Maurizio Ferraris

1. Perceived causality

Allow me to tell you a true story, related to me by Paolo BOZZI.

In 1943-1944, Wolfgang METZGER was serving in the army in Cassino, Italy. One day he went to the toilet in the barracks where his company was quartered, and when he was done he flushed the toilet. At that very moment a grenade hit the barracks, so that METZGER got the impression that by flushing the toilet he had been the cause of the disaster. METZGER *saw* such causality, just as one sees a chair or a color.

One way to straighten out the whole matter would be to claim that METZGER had been victim of some kind of optical illusion. But if we try to look into it more carefully, we realize that deep in METZGER's toilet lies a radical attack against the last stronghold of Kant's transcendental philosophy, namely the fact that there is at least one thing which is not in the world but which is supplied by thought, namely causality.

The argument works and sounds very persuasive. In fact it seems to us, on the strength of actual evidence, that when with my pen I hit the chalk placed on the table and the chalk moves, I did not need either substance or mutual interaction in order to grasp all these objects and their relationships, and that I added something *by my thought* only at the time when I inferred that the chalk moves, because it has been hit by the pen. In short, while I *saw* substance and mutual interaction, I *thought* of causality.

Yet, is it true? Let us recall our anecdote: METZGER *saw* causality. Indeed, he saw it so well that the evidence under his eyes led him to overlook all arguments, both logical and epistemological, which make the idea that flushing a toilet may blow up a barracks sound absurd. So, although it seems reasonable to re-describe experience in such a way as to believe that it's us who add causality, through our thought, there is no guarantee that this is really the case. As MICHOTTE noted in the Fifties, we *see* (and we don't *think*) the iron filings swooping against the magnet, which means that causality is perceived, as it is shown by the experience of false causality, just as we see the sun revolving around the earth although we are well aware that the opposite is true.

METZGER *saw* a cause, even if a split second later he *thought* that it was implausible. It is, therefore, hard to suppose with KANT that causality is a pure principle of the intellect: perceived causality is one thing and it is sensible; thought causality is quite another. This latter is not a principle with which the intellect constitutes experience; at most it explains it sooner or later or perhaps never (was the hole in my jacket caused by a smoking butt or by moths?). But if it *explains* and does not *constitute*, HUME might have been right, and the idea of a cause might be supplied by experience. In fact, not even this can be right. METZGER's experience was of an implausible causality; that is, it was in conflict with everything that experience itself had taught him up till then.

Here we have a fine case in which two great philosophers have both got it wrong. Causality is indeed *a priori* and does not depend on habit. But, at the same time, it amounts to a perceptual capacity, rather than a principle of the pure intellect, in much the same way as our tendency to divide up reality into objects is not, as we have seen, dependent on the intellectual category of ‘substance’.

2. Why do we need intellectual causality?

If that’s how things are, we should ask why some philosophers felt the need to introduce intellectual causality. The reasons may lie in a certain suspiciousness towards sensible experience as well as towards induction.

The idea that sensible experience is uncertain is nothing but DESCARTES’ starting point: sometimes senses may be deceptive so that we’d better be wary of those who have fooled us at least once. On the other hand, the idea that induction resting simply on experience is constitutively doubtful is HUME’s thesis: induction is about a series of possible cases of which we cannot be sure in the same way we are sure, for instance, of Mathematics. Just as alcohol and cigarettes reinforce each other, so do such thesis’: on one hand, the thesis of deceptive senses is subject to the uncertainty of induction (even if our senses had never deceived us, we could not rule out that this may well happen in the future); on the other hand, the thesis of the uncertainty of induction is strengthened by the idea that senses may deceive us (induction is not only subject to the chance of sensible experience, but also to the inadequacy of our means to get it).

But at this point, what’s wrong with this line of reasoning? My idea is that we are dealing with an intricate bundle of things that have little to do with each other. In particular:

1. The fact that sometimes I might be deceived by my senses (i.e. to make a blunder).
2. The inappropriate conclusion according to which I should always distrust my sensible experience, to the extent that I should doubt even the existence of my two hands (since I might be dreaming)
3. The fact that bulbs sometimes burn out (however little it is, it’s still something: there may well be an eternal bulb, but we behave as if there isn’t any).
4. The inappropriate conclusion according to which the principle of causality, empirically founded on the law: “push the button and the light will turn on”, has to be regarded as a sheer fact of habit, for sooner or later the bulb will burn out.

These arguments depend on the existing confusion between ontology (what there is) and epistemology (what we know), as well as the confusion between experience and science. Now, if we agree that it is one thing to think something and another thing to know it, we have to acknowledge also that to know something and to encounter it are also two different things (for instance, when we stumble on a chair in the dark). And we have to acknowledge that most of our experience, however complex it may

turn out, rests on an opaque but stable ground, a ground on which the conceptual schemes we exploit to arrange our knowledge have almost no role and where the problem of sense deception and the problem of the uncertainty of induction have only marginal roles, whereas in scientific experience things are exactly the opposite and such problems turn out to be crucial.

So, the fact that our senses sometimes may deceive us of course has an epistemological significance, but from an ontological point of view there's really no doubt that it is only through our senses that we have a direct access to physical reality and to the ecological sphere in which our surviving is possible. In other words, it is true that in doing science a single counterexample may be lethal for a theory, since a theory is true (at least in principle) only when the totality of cases is taken in account. But in our experience we naturally rely on probability: the difference is not between being 100% certain, with uncertainty starting at 99%, but rather, say, between 100% and 30%. So, in this sense, 95% (which roughly may be regarded as the degree of certainty of sensible experience) is the same as 100%. And this seems proved by the fact that in our experience we do trust our sensibility, for we seem to have no other choice.

Likewise, the fact that induction provides only probability and not certainty has only an epistemological relevance, but from that it does not follow that when a bulb burns out a contingent event is taking place. If a bulb is burned out, from the ontological point of view we are dealing with a state of affairs that is as undeniable and necessary as $2 + 2 = 4$.

To regard such circumstance as contingent at least two steps are needed. 1. To regard certainty as epistemological: to be certain is to be 100% certain; but since in the physical world nothing is proved at such degree, everything is contingent. 2. Experience should be replaced by science in the following sense: the bulb may not turn on (epistemology: what I *know* about the bulb), then its being turned on as well as its possible burning out turn out to be contingent (for I cannot foresee the exact moment in which these events might occur).

Ontologically speaking, however, it should be clear that – in relation to (1), I do not need to know that a bulb is eternally turned on to establish that in the very same moment I'm looking at it, the bulb is turned on or turned off (things would be different if I needed to determine whether the bulb is turned off or burned out, in such a case I would have to make some attempts, since a single observation would not be enough). In relation to (2), our difficulties in foreseeing the events do not imply that the lamp is not in fact turned on, neither that I might be able, only exploiting what I know (foresee: epistemology), to conclude that the lamp is turned off (ontology: what the lamp *is* like).

3. Why we do not need intellectual causality

What does such ontological stability depend on? Whatever it is, I propose to define it with the category of "Unamendableness".

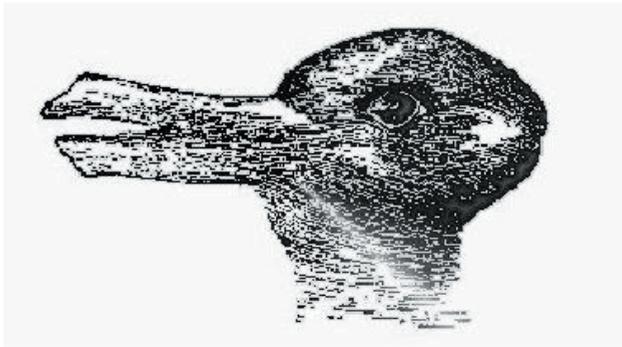
We all agree that things in the past are irrevocable: they necessarily occurred, but with that kind of necessity that we can recognize only a posteriori. For instance, it may be that someone does not know that during the Leipzig battle in 1813 part of the Saxon Army

betrayed NAPOLEON to join the Prussians, the Russians and the Austrians. And it may well be that the Saxons themselves did not know it in 1812, during the Borodin battle. Nonetheless, this is exactly what happened. The conceptual difficulties that are revealed by thought experiments about time traveling originate precisely from the fact that we cannot alter our past. For instance, it seems utterly implausible to commit a sophisticated form of suicide by traveling to the past in order to kill our grandpa in his cradle. For if we live in this very moment, then necessarily our grandpa has lived at an earlier time.

But then, if we are so convinced about the irrevocability of past events, why do we have to regard present events as doubtful? For instance, past events may sometimes disprove our expectations and may contradict our own conceptual schemes (undoubtedly, NAPOLEON didn't expect the Saxons' betrayal), and this is because experience provides us with something we just, as it were, stumble upon, i.e. something that seems as inalterable as logical constraints are: the whole is bigger than the parts that constitute it, what is red is not green, without keys I cannot open the door, and if the Saxons change their allies, they'll have different allies. Now, such necessity seems to have the features of what I call "unamendableness": i.e. of what cannot be amended.

Some may ask what we should do with such category. The basic idea of "unamendableness" is essentially the following: if we allow that a key feature of objectivity, also of scientific objectivity, is a kind of invariance through transformations, then the object independence from subjective conceptual schemes (or independence from epistemology) seems to be an even stronger criterion for objectivity. This is what I call "unamendableness": when I'm looking at a fire, I can think about it as a phenomenon of oxidation or as the result of the action of phlogiston, but I certainly would burn my hands if I put them on the flames (unless I'm wearing fireproof gloves), and this is typically something everyone is ready to confirm, I believe, by putting, metaphorically speaking of course, a hand on the fire.

In conclusion, in JASTROW's Rabbit-Duck there are both the rabbit and the duck, and the two results are in a relation of ontological dependence:



Until now, no surprises. It's a funny game the first time we see the picture. But the interesting part of the game is when we try to act on the dependence and try to see at the same time both the rabbit and the duck. We are not able to do it, and at best what we get is nothing but a monster, which is not a rabbit nor a duck, with an open mouth in the place of the rabbit's or the duck's eye. This is a clear case of unamendableness: I know that the animals in the picture are two, but I can see only one animal at a time.

Of course, we can say that the impossibility of seeing both the rabbit and the duck at the same time (although we know they are both there) might depend on our cognitive make-up and not on the Rabbit-Duck's own features, and on what we mean by "seeing". However, if someone saw at the same time the rabbit and the duck, it would not be a different performance (such as Paris-New York in 2 hours), but we would have a different meaning of the word "seeing", and a completely different experience. And if this is not the proof of how powerful material necessity (i.e. independent from conceptual schemes) can be, I wonder what else can persuade us.

Abstract

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Zusammenfassung

Paolo BOZZI erzählte mir folgende wahre Geschichte. Wolfgang METZGER war 1943-44 Soldat in Cassino, Italien. Eines Tages ging er auf die Toilette in den Baracken, in der seine Kompanie einquartiert war, und bediente dann die Spülung. Genau in diesem Moment traf eine Granate auf die Baracken, so dass METZGER den Eindruck hatte, dass er selber durch das bedienen der Spülung die Katastrophe verursacht hatte. METZGER *sah* diese Kausalität, so wie man einen Stuhl oder eine Farbe sieht.

Man könnte das Problem los werden, indem man behauptet, dass METZGER Opfer irgendeiner Art optischer Illusion gewesen ist. Beim genaueren Hinschauen merkt man jedoch, dass tief in METZGERs Toilette ein radikaler Angriff auf die letzte Bastion der KANTschen transzendentalen Philosophie liegt – auf die Annahme, dass es zumindest Eines gibt, das nicht in der Welt ist und erst durch das Denken entsteht, Kausalität nämlich.

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