

RUB

# *What the Hell is Causal Responsibility?*

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13.11.2019



# Starting Point

- Causal and moral responsibility judgments are **intimately connected**
- We already have
  - **Philosophical** approaches to this connection
  - **Psychological** models
- Both philosophy and psychology have **recently been challenged by experimental philosophers**
- There is a lot of disagreement about how we should deal with this challenge



# Aim of This Talk

- Convince you that **this challenge has been over-estimated**
- Why?
- Because we haven't determined the most critical concepts of the debate
- And we don't understand the cognitive processes underlying causal and moral judgments





### **Part 1**

What is the relevance of causal responsibility for philosophical accounts of moral responsibility?

### **Part 2**

Challenges from experimental philosophy and research on causal cognition

### **Part 3**

How much of a challenge is the new empirical evidence?

1. What are the researchers interested in?
2. Do they speak about the same things, when they talk about causal responsibility?
3. How should we interpret the experimental evidence? responsibility judgment?

### **Part 3**

What kind of experimental evidence do we need? What should we do next?





# PART 1

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# A Philosophical Perspective



“(MIC) If an agent A is morally responsible for an event e, then A performed an action or omission that caused e.”

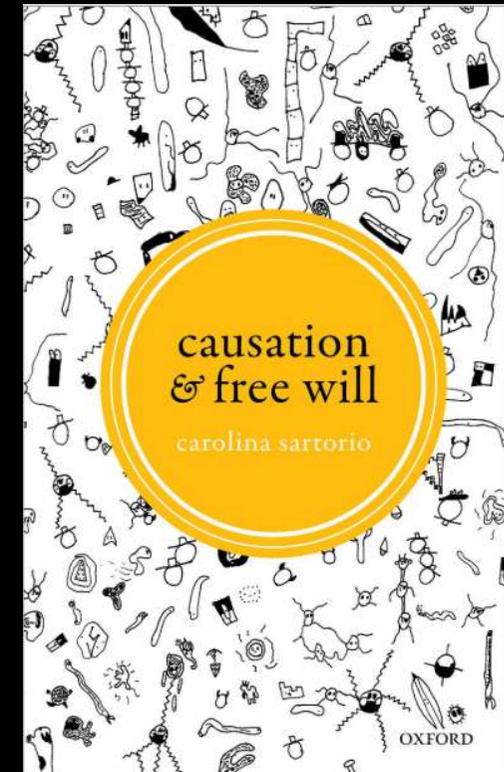
(Driver, 2007, p. 423)

“when we hold an individual morally responsible for some event, we are doing more than identifying her particularly crucial role in the causal series that brings about the event in question. We are regarding her as a fit subject for credit or discredit on the basis of the role she plays.”

(Wolf, 1993, p. 166)



“(Entailment-Dependence) An agent A is morally responsible for an outcome O only if A is causally responsible for O, i.e. only if one of A’s actions or omissions caused O; moreover, the fact that one of A’s actions or omissions caused O (partly) explains the fact that A is morally responsible for O.”  
(Sartorio, 2007, p. 750)





“..., daß moralische Verantwortung persönliche Kausalität voraussetzt, d.h., daß eine Person x moralisch nur dann für eine Handlung h bzw. den Zustand p eines Gegenstands y verantwortlich ist, wenn x durch h eine kausale Wirkung auf p von y ausüben kann. Dies ist die Minimalbedingung der persönlichen Kausalität.”  
(Neumaier, Kollektiv)

→ Necessity Claims

# Necessity

- Moral responsibility **presupposes or entails** causal responsibility
- A moral responsibility judgment without a causal responsibility judgment is deficient or even impossible

# A Psychological Perspective

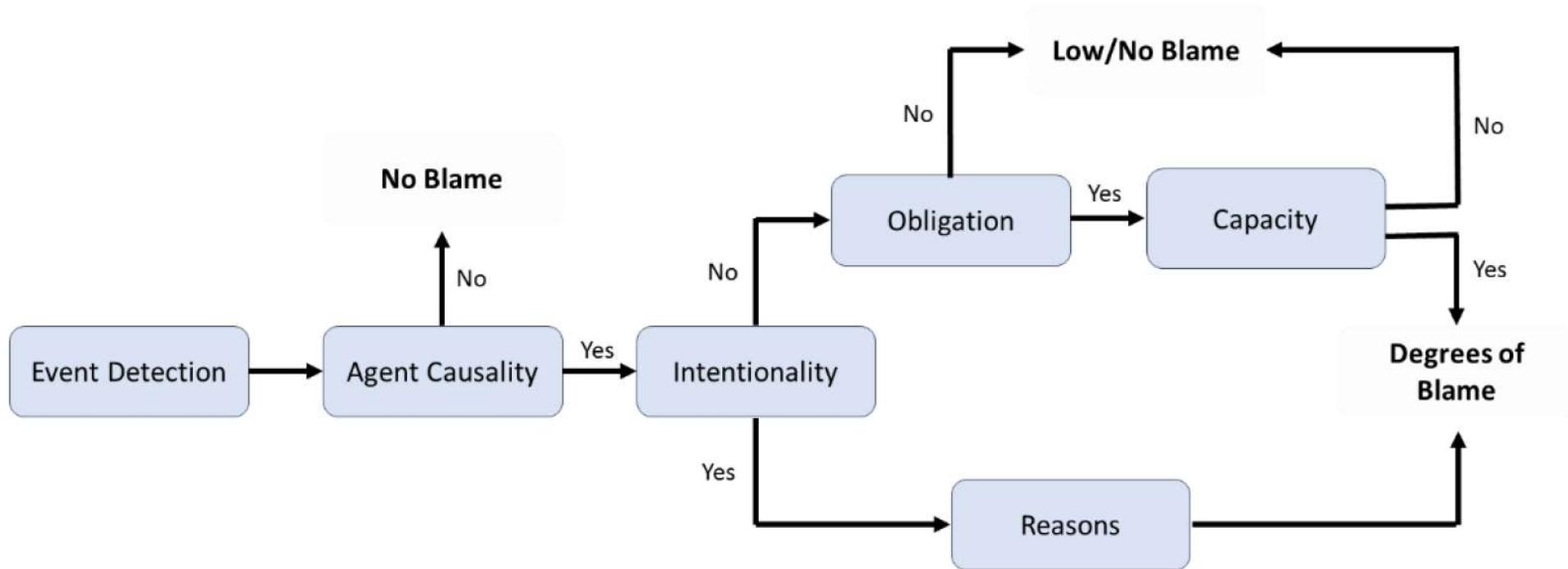
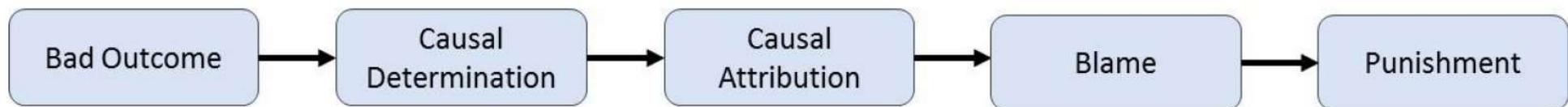


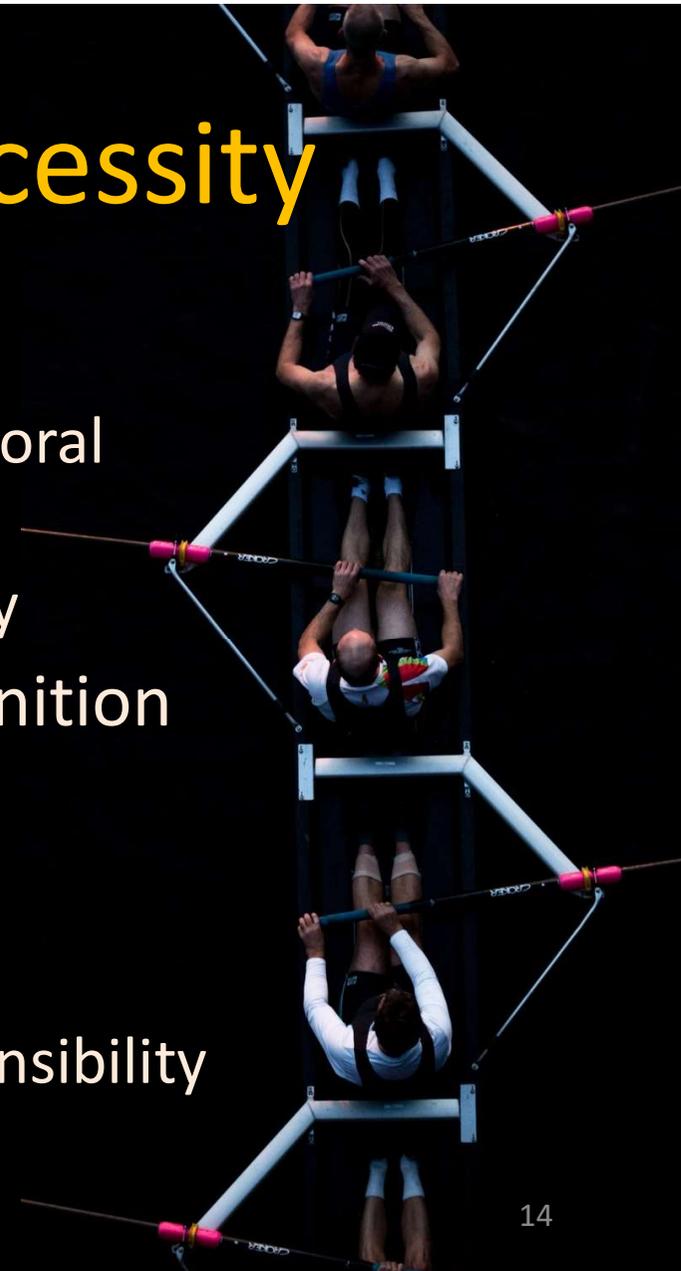
Figure 2: Malle's Path Model of moral responsibility attribution, adapted from Malle et al., 2014.



**Figure 1: Darley & Shultz's model of moral judgment making, adapted from (Darley & Shultz, 1990)**

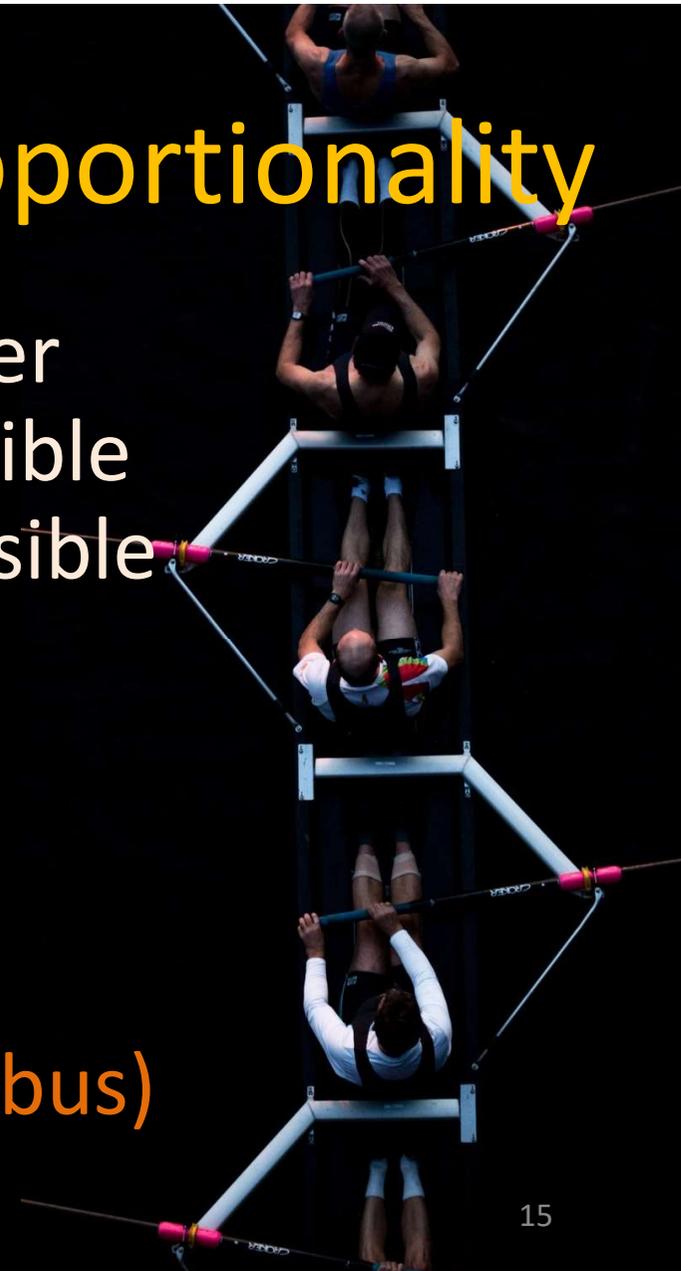
# A Surprising Agreement – Necessity

- **Philosophers** provide either
    - a normative theory of how we should make moral judgments
    - or a conceptual analysis of moral responsibility
  - **Psychologists** provide a model of moral cognition
- Empirical evidence suggests that either
- people do make moral judgments as they are supposed to
  - or that the conceptual analysis of moral responsibility is correct



# A Surprising Agreement – Proportionality

- Philosophers and psychologists further agree that the more causally responsible an agent is, the more morally responsible she is
- Changes in moral responsibility are proportionate to changes in causal responsibility
- ChangeCR → ChangeMR (ceteris paribus)





# PART 2

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# An Experimental-Philosophical Perspective

- New experimental evidence suggests a more complex relationship between causal and moral responsibility
- Moral judgments affect our causal judgments
- Philosophical and psychological theories are in trouble





Based on Knobe and Fraser, 2008

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

- Kevin caused the problem  $M = -1.2$
- Pascale caused the problem  $M = 2.2$



(-3 meaning „not at all“, 3 meaning „fully“)

# Who caused the problem?

- Kevin
- Pascale
- Both
- Neither



# Moral Evaluations Affect Causal Judgments

Norm-violating agents in conjunctive causal structures are considered more of a cause compared to norm-conforming agents → abnormal inflation

- Knobe 2005
- Kominsky et al. 2015
- Icard, Kominsky & Knobe 2017
- Kirfel & Lagnado 2017
- ...

# Effects of Norms on Causal Judgments

- Norm-violators attract more causal responsibility in conjunctive cases → **abnormal inflation**
- Norm-violators attract less causal responsibility in disjunctive cases → **abnormal deflation**
- Agents attract more causal responsibility than inanimate objects → **agency effect**
- If the outcome of an action is undesirable, the agent is considered more of a cause compared to when the outcome is neutral or good → **outcome effect**
- ...

[m]oral considerations actually figure in the fundamental competencies people use to make sense of the world.

There is now good reason to believe there are no concepts anywhere in folk psychology that enable one to describe an agent's attitudes in a way that is entirely independent of moral considerations.

The use of [statistical and moral] considerations is simply built into the fundamental mechanisms that subserve people's counterfactual reasoning. [...] Since causal judgments make use of counterfactuals, and since moral considerations play a role in the mechanisms underlying counterfactual reasoning, moral considerations end up playing a role in causal judgments as well.



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These results suggest, in contrast to virtually all extant models of responsibility attribution, that the degree of culpability in an act can influence perceptions of causation.

We have shown that evaluations are an important component of causation judgments for undesirable or harmful actions, and we have demonstrated that causation judgments, at least in some circumstances, are determined by perceived blameworthiness rather than the reverse. Norm violations are important determinants of perceived causal influence

However, on the responsibility view, the ordinary concept of causation doesn't merely have normative content that makes causal attributions sensitive to injunctive norms, it has normative content that leads to causal attributions generally being similar to responsibility attributions.



# Other Arguments Along This Line

- Josh Knobe with C. Hitchcock, J. Doris, J. Philipps, A. Bear
- Justin Systema with J. Livengood
- Mark Alicke with D. Rose, D. Bloom
- David Lagnado
- Tobias Gerstenberg
- Sarah McGrath
- Paul Henne
- Lara Kirfel
- Kevin Reuter
- Pascale Willemsen
- .....

# Cognitive Processes of Moral Judgment-Making

Judgment that A acted  
wrongly

Attribution of blame

Attribution of causation

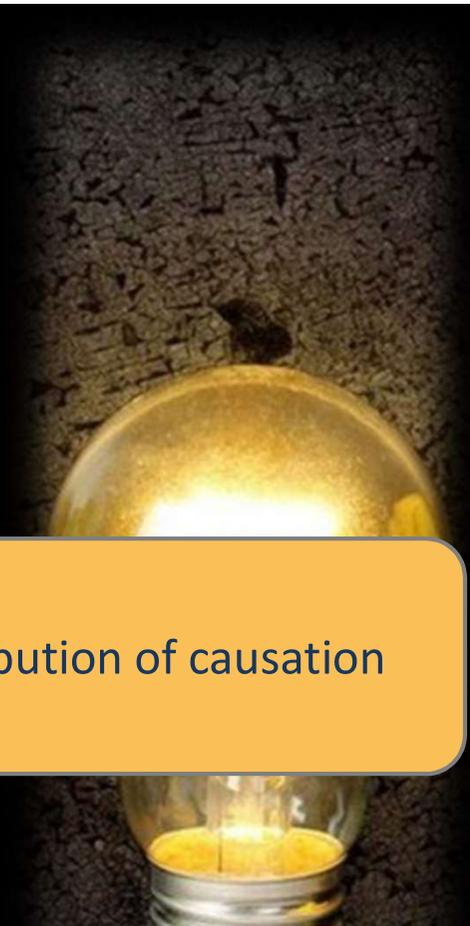
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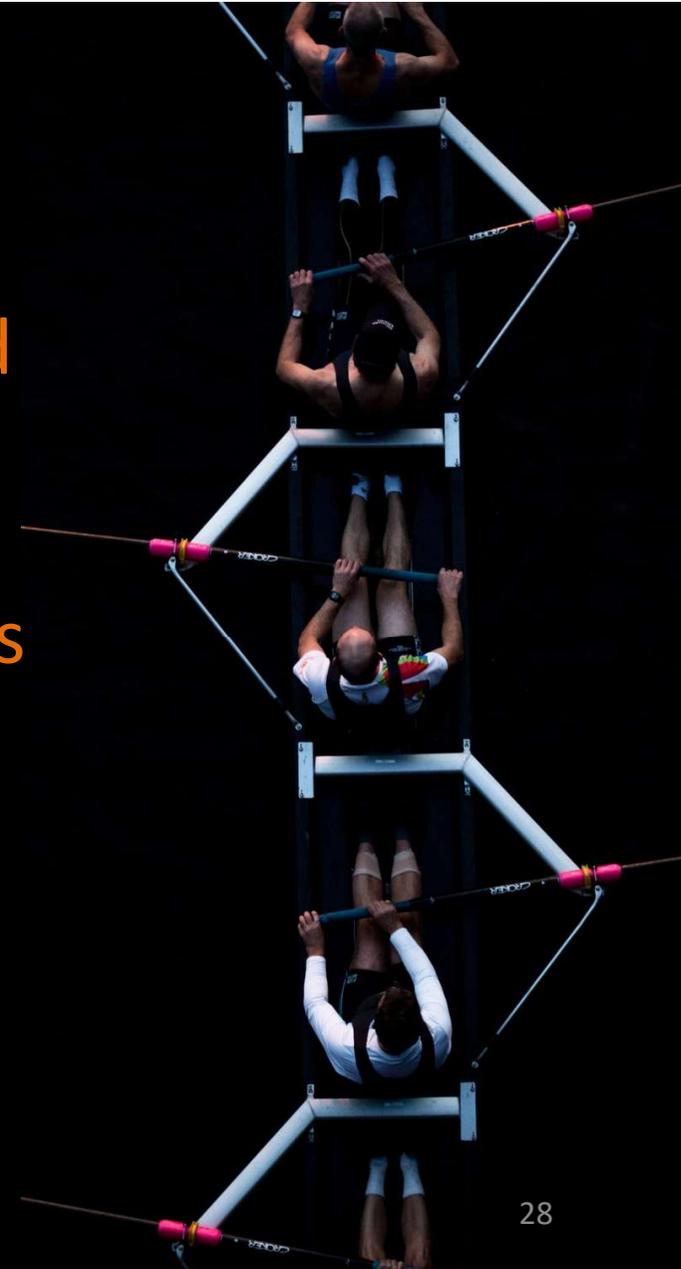
Attribution of blame

Knobe's Obtrudeness Model



# Reconsidering Necessity

- Claiming Necessity is empirically justified if philosophers make a conceptual claim
- If Necessity is a normative pre-condition of moral judgments, our moral practice is systematically deficient
  - Causal responsibility judgments are the result of motivated, biased cognition
  - Therefore, they cannot justify or ground moral judgments



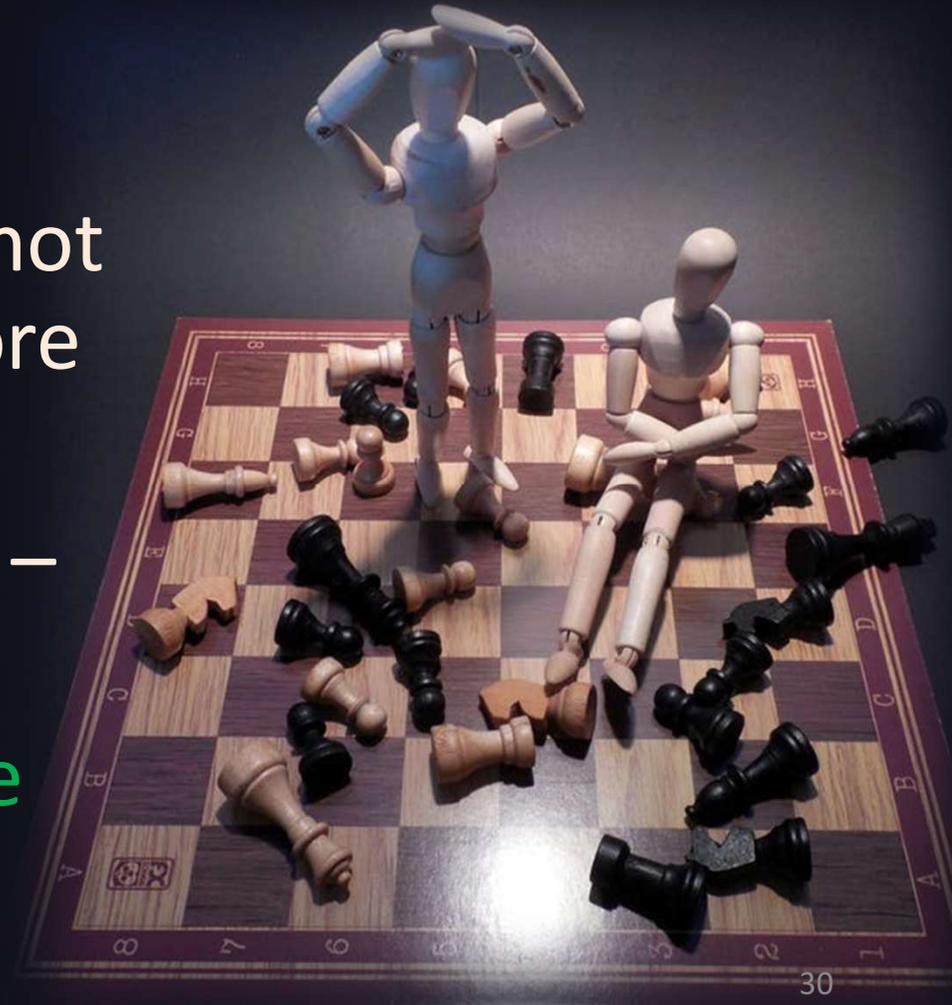
# Reconsidering Proportionality

- Changes in causal responsibility do not affect moral responsibility
- It is exactly the opposite way around
- ChangeCR  $\rightarrow$  ChangeMR is wrong
- Instead, we have ChangeMR  $\rightarrow$  ChangeCR



# What Now?!

- Give up and go home!
- Experimental philosophy cannot inform philosophy – let's ignore all this and move on!
- People can learn to do better – let's try to educate them!
- Let's keep calm and dig a little deeper!





# PART 3

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# Where Should We Dig?

- Let's start with causal responsibility
- Philosophers and experimental philosophers talk about two different things
- Both perspectives are worth taking
- But how these perspectives are related and can inform each other is unclear



“(Entailment-Dependence) An agent A is morally responsible for an outcome O only if A is causally responsible for O, i.e. only if one of A’s actions or omissions caused O”



“(Entailment-Dependence) An agent A is morally responsible for an outcome O only if A is causally responsible for O, i.e. only if one of A’s actions or omissions caused O”

- Causal responsibility is a property of an agent
- The cause of an event B is the agent’s action or omission
- Philosophers in the debate are interested in ontic causal claims

# Some Suggestions

- Experimental philosophers do not investigate ontic causal claims
- Laypeople don't make ontic causal claims
- They provide causal explanations
- Causal judgments need to fulfil various pragmatic functions
- These pragmatic functions determine the quality of an explanation



# Causal Judgments in Moral Contexts

- Causal judgments differ along a variety of factors
  1. Causal relata
  2. Causal relation itself
  3. Determining causal involvement vs. causal selection



# Causal Relata

## ■ Agents

- “Who caused the computer to crash? Jane, Lauren, neither, both”
- “Do you agree or disagree with the following claim?: Agent caused the outcome”

## ■ Events

- “Did hitting marble B cause marble B to move?”

## ■ Omissions

- “The plants dried up and died because Barry didn’t water them”
- “Marble B missed the gate because marble A did not hit marble B”

# Causal Relata – Why Care?

- The causal relatum can strongly affect people's causal intuitions
- We don't get people's causal intuitions *per se*, but their response to a very specific way of asking about causation
- For every metaphysical theory of causation, experimental philosophers need a story of how causal explanations can be translated to ontic causal claims

# An example



Alice goes on holiday for two weeks. Before leaving, she asks her neighbour Barry to water her plants in the garden during her absence. Barry promises to water them since he knows that otherwise they will dry up. Even though Barry is at home during the two weeks and could water the plants, he does not. When Alice returns from her holidays, her plants are dried up and dead.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

- Barry caused the plants to dry up and die *Yes = 87%*
- Barry not watering the plants caused the plants to die up and die *Yes = 62%*

# Causal Judgments in Moral Contexts

- Causal judgments differ along a variety of factors
  1. Causal relata
  2. Determining causal involvement vs. causal selection
  3. Causal relation itself



# Causal Involvement vs. Selection

## ■ Causal involvement:

- “How much do you agree with the following statement:“
- “To what extent did AGENT cause Outcome“
- “There are various factors that contributed to Bill’s death, some of these factors contributed more and others less. To what extent to you believe that AGENT caused Victim’s death“

## ■ Causal selection:

- “Who caused the problem?“
- “Did Agent cause the accident?“
- “What was the cause of the accident?“

# Involvement vs. Selection – Why Care?

The experimental design and the formations of test queries can have severe effects on the results

## 1. Pragmatic effects

- “The story I read is similar to real life”
- “The words in the story mean the same as always”
- Assumptions about the relevance of certain questions

## 2. Experimental pragmatics

- “If the experimenter asks about this thing, this thing is important”
- “There is a right answer”
- Assumptions about the researchers’ goals



# Involvement vs. Selection – Why Care?

- Asking participants to identify the cause suggests that there is this one thing that caused the outcome
  - Asking this way
    - might trigger the search for the one thing that is different from the others
    - might be interpreted as a moral questions
- it might trigger an understanding that asks for normative considerations

# Involvement vs. Selection – Why Care?

- Experimental results

# Causal Judgments in Moral Contexts

- Causal judgments differ along a variety of factors
  1. Causal relata
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# Causal Relation – Why Care?

- Depending on the test query, different understandings of causation can be triggered
  - A physicalist understanding
  - A dependency understanding of causation

# Physicalist Theories of Causation

- Causation is **associated with production** or some kind of **oomph**
- It's a matter of energy transfer between cause and effect
- Whether such energy is transferred or not, is an empirical question
  - causal claims are made true by the world
- **A cause can transfer varying amounts of energy**

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# Physicalist Theories of Causation

- Physicalist theories of causation capture our intuition that A can be more or less of a cause of B  
→ they allow for graded causation of causal involvement



# Physicalist Theories of Causation

- But physicalist theories of causation don't seem to suffice to cover all our intuitions
- They cannot account for causation by omissions

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# Dependency Theories

- Causal relations are a special kind of counterfactual relation
- “A caused B” is true if “If A had not happened, B would not have happened”
- But this test only allows for a Yes/No answer

WHAT IF...?

# Intermediate Summary

Summary

- Philosophers who defended Necessity are interested in true ontic causal claims
- Thus, Necessity can only be refuted by evidence that people fail to make true ontic causal claims
- Experimental philosophers do not provide such evidence
- Experimental philosophers investigate causal explanations that are appropriate or inappropriate depending on pragmatic considerations

# PART 4

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## What Do We Not Know?

1. We don't know what ontic causal judgments people actually make in those experiments
2. We don't know if moral judgments influence ontic causal judgments
3. Based on 1, we cannot infer any cognitive process
4. Based on 2 and 3, we have no reason to reject the Entailment Claim

# Cognitive Processes of Moral Judgment-Making

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Attribution of blame

Attribution of causation

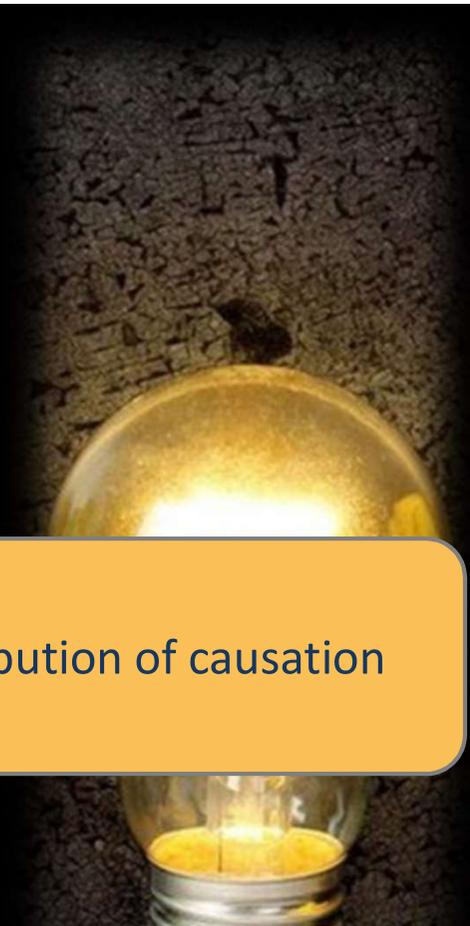
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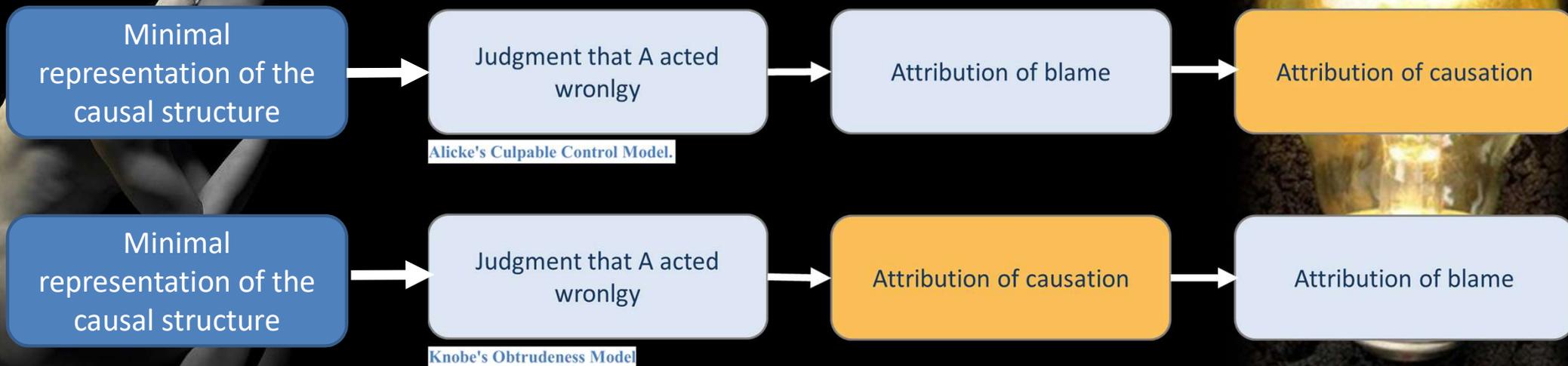
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# Cognitive Processes of Moral Judgment-Making





## What Should We Do Next?

1. Let's investigate how people represent causal structures of a scenario
2. Let's do that before giving information about morally relevant facts
3. Let's get rid of vignette studies
4. Present information in a more natural way, such as by interaction or observation of video sequences



# That's all Folks!

**RUB**

**Special thanks to:**

Sabrina Coninx  
Beate Krickel

Albert Newen  
Alex Wiegmann  
Julia Wolf  
& the Editors and Reviewers of  
*Oxford Studies in Experimental Philosophy*

**Get in touch!**



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