

Finding Causes in Biological Systems

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The two main contemporary approaches to causation appeal to mechanism and to intervention. Interventionism can be illuminating in explaining why we are particularly interested in certain kinds of causes (e.g. genes) but seems poorly equipped to address the complexity of living systems in vivo. While mechanism looks more promising at first sight, there are serious difficulties in disentangling specific mechanisms to answer specific causal questions. This talk will suggest that it is often more helpful to see causes as conceptual impositions on biological processes; this relates to the more general issue of how biological things are abstracted from what are ultimately always highly dynamic processes.