

Reflections on Causality: Traps and challenges

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Quite often we think we know the reasons for our actions as for instance why we buy what we do, why we marry a specific person, embark on a certain career etc.

Nisbet and Wilson in their classical article in *Psychological Review* 1977 'Telling more than we can know' argue that what people generally think about "causes" of their behaviour to a large extent reflects cultural clichés. Partly there may be an intrinsic bias in the question "why did you do X": it invites clichés rather than being open to a variety of alternatives. Another perspective is the basic cognitive illusion that "pronounced consequences" must have very significant causes. This way of thinking ignores the basic fact of positive feedback: Seemingly small starting impulses may have wider and wider ramifications, or so-called snow ball effects.

In psychology Fay Fransella's work on reasons for stuttering may serve as a prime example. Going through a variety of causal models she concludes that none of them have significant empirical backing. Rather she has a snowball effect model. All children have periods of more or less pronounced dysfunctional speech and attempts to correct this may "snowball" into a path of even more dysfunctional speech.

Jared Diamond encountered a *why* question which fortunately did not lead to an answer in form of a cliché. A native in New Guinea asked why the white people had so much "cargo" (useful tools etc.) while the blacks had practically none. The "unthinking answer" would be e.g. "intellectual superiority" in white people. Rejecting such clichés Diamond spent 25 years searching for alternative answers, and in 1995 he published 'Guns, germs and steel'. Comparing a variety of cultures he found a very limited set of animals suitable for domestication, furthermore similar for plants suitable for farming. For instance: The aborigines in Australia are not lacking in intellectual abilities, but have neither animals for domestication nor plants suitable for crops.

Diamond's comparative research shows how environment – biology interactions shape history at large, and supplements micro studies of studies of e.g. cultural differences in perception of "what tastes good" and biological differences in "taste blindness".