1. This session is doing double duty as the public lecture for my book *Ontology Revisited* having co-won the Cheryl Frank Memorial Award in 2013. But you guys are mostly social scientists, so I thought that talking about why the philosophy of causation can’t be sidestepped might be more interesting for you than hearing about the metaphysical infrastructure of modern social and political thought.

1b. Still, a word about the book. The general thesis was that there’s no way to think about social reality without committing yourself, metaphysically. The “Myth of Metaphysical Neutrality,” as I’ve called it, is just that -- a myth.

Why? Because if you’re making claims about the world, then you’re already doing metaphysics. If you write books about the nature of the capitalist state, for example – I teach in a political science department, though nobody in American political science departments does actually write books about this (and not just about the behavior, beliefs or characteristics of individuals), then – manifestly – you think that a state is something that does or could exist.

At one level, “The American state is a capitalist institution” is a social scientific claim – empirical, but also theoretical. And we could ask you what your reasoning is at that level – what makes you say that it’s a capitalist state and not a feudal state; whether you think that it’s a liberal capitalist state or a fascist one; etcetera.

But it’s also a philosophical claim. At the level of metaphysics, if you were to deny the phenomenon of emergence, for example (i.e., that wholes are something other than a numerical plurality of parts), then you wouldn’t be able to say *anything* about the nature of the capitalist state, because you wouldn’t think that wholes such as states *exist*. Well, you could talk about them in the way that we talk about imaginary entities, such as unicorns, or Santa Claus, but you couldn’t talk about them as though they were a non-fictional phenomenon. [This is separate, I should say, from how you might answer any also-philosophical questions about the nature of universals (such as “the capitalist state”) and their relationship to particulars (here, any given capitalist state).]
Moreover, the idea that the world is made up out of formless, generic stuff that can be made into anything (which is how it would have to be, if you really could talk about this or that purportedly existing thing without committing yourself to anything, metaphysically) – that idea is itself a substantive metaphysical claim, and arguably a false one.

1c. In the book I was interested in the metaphysics upon which much modern and contemporary social and political thought rests, namely the atomistic, anti-essentialist, passivist (or anti-powers) ontological complement to empiricism. This particular metaphysics, I argued, shapes and constrains the discussion of agency and the social all the way down. The book is out in paper now, and except for the typos that it picked up in production, it’s pretty easy to read. I’ll come back to some of the points that I made there (& if anyone’s read it I’ll be happy to answer questions in the Q&A), but for now, let’s talk about causation.

2. Actually, let’s talk about the philosophy of causation – specifically, about disagreement over what causation is. Everyone should care about what causation is, but critical realists have a special connection to the metaphysics of causation because the core claim of A Realist Theory of Science was that both Hume and Kant were wrong about it.

I’m assuming that some of you have thought a lot about this issue. For those of you who have, I hope that what I say will be useful to you for talking with others. But if you haven’t, I hope that it will be helpful for your own thinking, too.

2a. If we could make just one joint-cutting distinction, in relation to the question of what causation is, it would be between what I’ll call passivist accounts, on the one hand, and non-passivist, or powers-based accounts, on the other.

Passivist accounts of causation fit into static pictures of the world in general -- passivist ontologies, we can say.

Powers-based accounts, in turn, are central to non-passivist, powers-based ontologies, ontologies that include active, productive doing of different kinds.

3. The best way to talk about what’s at stake between static and non-static views of the world is by way of analogy. Think of a children’s animated flipbook. The kind where you draw a number of images, each slightly
different, on separate pieces of paper, then fan through them quickly. When you do that, it looks as though the drawings are not just moving, but doing things. Let’s imagine a bit of flipbook animation that shows a figure doing something – weaving, say.

3a. We can use this imaginary flipbook to identify two different positions, corresponding to the ontologies that do and do not include real causal powers.

The first position is that real-world weaving is not at all like flipbook weaving. Specifically (says the proponent of this view), real weaving, unlike simulated weaving, is not composed of a sequence of static “stills.”

The second position is that real-world weaving and flipbook weaving are in fact exactly alike (in the relevant respect). Activity looks like something other than a sequence of static “stills,” but really it isn’t. Really, everything is static.

Position #1 is the powers-filled, anti-Humean picture of the world.

Position #2 is the static, passivist picture of the world.

I like the flip-book heuristic, but another way to capture the difference between a picture of the world in which everything is static and inert, and one that includes activity, is to say that the Humean one would have no need for verbs -- other than variants of the verb “to be,” itself understood in passivist terms.

4. The activity-allowing ontology naturally invites an account of causation in which causality is a matter of the expression of the powers of things (I’m using the word “thing” very loosely; it could refer to an object, but it could also be a relationship, or a process).

The picture of the world as static and inert, by contrast, precludes such an account. Causation can’t be about anything actually doing or producing anything, if there is no such thing as active producing or doing.

Notice that we are accustomed to “cause” being an active verb. Exposure to 2nd hand smoke causes damage to one’s lungs: the particulate and the chemicals do something. Salt does something to ice, causing it to melt. I just caused my pen to move, by lifting it.
Even a cause like patriarchy, you might think, if you think that it is one, actually causes there to be, say, differential wage rates by gender.

5. Various thinkers in the history of modern philosophy have held passivist ontologies, and have (as a result) claimed that causation isn’t about anything actually doing anything. But the paradigm version of it is Hume’s.

5a. This isn’t the time for a detailed lecture on Hume, but I want to lay out the basics of his approach. What Hume said is startling enough, and strange enough, that it awoke no less of a thinker than Kant from his dogmatic slumbers -- and it even unnerved Hume himself.

It’s important to know what Hume said because all of the mainstream contemporary passivist accounts of causation, from Mackie to Lewis to Woodward (yes, Woodward too), are fanced-up versions of Hume’s disavowal of causal powers.

5b. Hume had it that what can be meaningfully said to exist are impressions. This alone is tricky, since we want to think that an impression is an impression of something, but substances themselves, according to Hume, are just bundles of impressions, “unified,” as he put it, by the imagination. Impressions “of” substances don’t refer to anything other than this: bundles of impressions.

It’s a fact, says Hume, that some impressions are constantly conjoined with others, in our minds. Impression x, for example, is always followed by impression y. And he then makes two points. First, no given impression is ever necessarily followed by any other. Second – and this is the important part, for present purposes – there is no such a thing as a “causal-power-impression.”

The first claim, the one about contingency, was directed toward those philosophers who thought that things, or even just our ideas about the properties of things, are deterministically related via rational necessitation.

The second claim, the disavowal of causal powers, was directed to Aristotelians (who thought that things in the world are active), but also to those non-Aristotelians who thought that God, at least, is active, even if nothing else is – Descartes, for example, and maybe even Locke.
Reid, I should note, replied to Mr. Hume, as he called him, that proprioception consists precisely of felt causal-powers-impressions -- an argument advanced again in the 20th century by Harre & Madden, and even more recently by Stephen Mumford & Rani Anjum.

5c. In any case, here’s what Hume says causation is, given that the real world turns out to be like a flipbook: it’s the feeling of expectation that accompanies the first of a constantly conjoined sequence of impressions. To be a cause, in turn, is to be the impression (or the clump of impressions that is what a substance is) that just does always comes first.

Now, in the Enquiry Hume adds: “or in other words where, if the first object had not been, the second never had existed.” But he very quickly warns us that if we are tempted to think that a cause is “that which produces any thing” or even “that by which any thing exists,” all that we can intelligibly mean by either of these claims is that a cause is “that after which any thing constantly exists.” Indeed, necessity itself, he says, just is “this constancy.” [pps. 76 & 96]

5d. Okay, good. So Hume himself holds what is often called a regularity theory of causation. And if you agree with Hume that there is no such thing as a causal power, then there really is no other alternative than to identify causation with the fact of order: a cause can never be something that actually produces an effect, from a passivist perspective. This isn’t a contested inference; this is just what it is to deny the existence real causal powers.

6. Here’s a fairly exhaustive list of contemporary passivist accounts of what it is to be a cause. I can show you how they all amount to an assertion of regular order in the Q&A, if you don’t believe me.

   a. To be a cause is to always come first.
   b. To be a cause is to necessarily come first, but not because of anything other than the fact of really & truly always coming first.
   c. E.g., to be a cause is to come first in all possible worlds.
   d. To be a cause is to come first a sufficient % of the time.
   e. To be a cause is to always come first, when a statement has been made to the effect that this fact has been observed to be the case.
   f. To be a cause is to always or often come first, and for this fact to be explicable (albeit without reference to anything being able to do anything).
   g. To be a cause is to be the right kind of condition.
h. To be a cause is to be a statement, specifically a generalized statement of regularity.

i. To be a cause is to be part of a statement, specifically: the counterfactual part of a subjunctive conditional statement.

j. To be a cause is to figure in a hypothetical intervention, expressed as a subjunctive conditional, with the stipulation that the imagined intervention can’t itself involve any active doing or producing.

k. To be a cause is to be that upon which an outcome counterfactually depends, but not in the sense that the cause actively produces the outcome or brings the outcome about.

l. To be a cause is to be that which is constantly conjoined, via a sequence of constant conjunctions, to something else.

m. To be a cause (or a so-called causal mechanism) is to be a chain of regular conjunctions between two things that are constantly conjoined.

6a. You can see that with some of these it’s going to be tempting to imagine that you can hold the view in question and also still think that causation involves active, productive, verb-like doing.

But these definitions aren’t ways to spell out a belief in productive causation; they’re alternatives to that view. They’re what people say causation is when they can’t say that it’s about the display of powers, because they don’t believe that things have any powers.

6b. To be clear: it’s not that a person who believes in productive causation can’t talk about counterfactual dependence, for example. Not for a minute. In fact, she can say that an effect really does depend on its cause! Why? Because the cause caused it; the cause made it happen. The counterfactualist, by contrast, can say only that “counterfactual dependence” is equivalent to “true in all possible worlds” – which just means “Is too a constant conjunction – not just here but everywhere!”

7. If you think that causes actually do something, then – like it or not – you hold a powers-based view of what causation is.

7a. Powers theorists argue amongst themselves about all sorts of fine and not-so-fine grained points, but there’s agreement on the most basic point, which is whether or not real-world activity is like flipbook-activity. The powers theorist says no. Real-world activity, and by extension real-world causation, involves the display of powers-to-do. The passivist denies this. There is no such thing as a causal power, she says, and therefore no displays
thereof; there is only what amounts, in the end, to regular or constant conjunction.

8. I have good news and bad news. First the bad news. It’s either/or, whether you’re a passivist or not. And it’s not a choice that you can duck. Non-philosophers, especially, sometimes think either that it’s possible to be neutral, or that you can be a passivist and still get to talk about causes doing something other than just being that which does always comes first. But no go.

8a. Let’s think about some possible objections to the bad news, before moving on to the good news. I’ll put them in the form of questions. I’ve got 7 of them.

8a1. “Why can’t I be neutral, or agnostic, about what causation is? I’m a social scientist, not a philosopher.”

Okay, the really, really bad news is that as soon as you use any active verbs at all, you’re committed, one way or another; you either mean to be talking about a succession of static stills and nothing more (here, there or in all possible worlds), or you mean to be talking about a phenomenon other than that, one that is commonly called “activity,” and is not commonly taken to be equivalent to stasis.

And as a social scientist you aren’t just using any old verbs. You’re using the verb “to cause.” You might be right that you don’t have a full-blown theory of what causation is. And you might also be right to think that you aren’t the person to look to for one. But when you say: “This caused that” – even if your own emphasis is on the “this” and the “that,” rather than on the “caused” – what you can’t do is avoid meaning something by it. By the verb “caused,” I mean.

And no matter what you mean by it exactly, you either mean that “this” did something, this made it be that “that” occurred – or you don’t. We can run through examples if you like, but really – if you tell us that “This causes that,” you’re either telling us that this brings that about, or you’re telling us that “this, that” is an ordered pair, and nothing more.

8a2. “Why can’t it be that what I really mean is ‘This explains that’ (or ‘This is the reason for that’)? If I don’t claim that this causes that, then I
won’t have to worry about not knowing what I mean when I use the word ‘cause’!

Two reasons. First, imagine declaring: “I can explain why that happens; I just can’t say what causes it to happen.” If you were to actually say that – well, eyes would roll. But okay: let’s play it out.

If you were to say “I can explain why that happens; I just can’t say what causes it to happen,” you’d be asked to say what you mean by “explain why.” And you’d have to say: “Well, one thing’s for sure. When I say that I can explain why something happens, I certainly don’t mean to say that I can give a causal explanation for why it happens.”

But that would sound ridiculous. And it would be ridiculous. So you’d have to say something different from that. You might say: “Well, I can’t explain why it happens, but I can explain – you know – it.”

And what would you mean by that? You’d mean something like “I can tell you what x is.” So you’d be saying “I have no idea what caused x – or what causes x’s generally – but I can tell you what they are” (or, perhaps, what they mean). That’s fine. Good, even: we like knowing what things are (and what they mean). But you wouldn’t have explained it in the sense of having the foggiest idea why it happened.

Second, if you were to insist on the “I can explain why” locution, and we wanted it to be over quickly, all we would have to do after you say “This is what explains why that happened” is ask you if you mean that this actually brought that about? You’d either have to answer yes or no, which would commit you, or you’d have to say “I have no idea,” in which case we are back to eyes rolling.

It’s the same, by the way, if you switch to “All I know is: if you want that to happen, do this.” You’ll either have to say that the predictive claim is true because something about this is actually bringing that about, or you’ll have to reiterate that you have no idea why “this” is followed by “that.” Which is fine; I mean, I don’t know why either. But I’m not claiming to know anything about the thises and the thats!

8a3. “Hold up. I’m a social scientist. We don’t talk about what-causes-what, or even about what caused that. We talk about action, which isn’t caused at all. On the contrary, it’s done for reasons.”
Thanks to Doug Porpora for that one. This is actually a complicated issue, but the short answer is that if you think that actions aren’t caused by anything, it’s going to be hard to attach acts to the agents who have supposedly done them. Also, a truly a-causal phenomenon would arguably be metaphysically random in a way that agency – let alone reason-governed agency – just isn’t.

8a4. “Why can’t I be a pluralist about what causation is? ‘Let a thousand theories of causation bloom,’ I say.”

Because passivism and anti-passivism are contraries.

8a5. “Why can’t it be that I’m a person who knows what causes certain things, but not what causation is? In fact, I do know what causes certain things (or at least I think I do), and I definitely don’t have a theory about what causation is. So, you know, I refute you thus!”

This is just a re-wording of #1. And the answer is the same. A theory about what causes what in a given case or type of case is different from a theory about what causation is. But if you claim that this causes that, you can’t help but know what you mean when you claim such a thing. And you either mean that something about this makes it be that that; or you don’t. If you honestly have no idea what you yourself mean when you say that this actually causes that, then, as before, it’s hard to see how anyone could take your claim seriously, even if they wanted to.

8a6. “What’s so bad about only knowing that this and that are constantly conjoined? I’m an empiricist; my job is to track regularities.”

I never said that it’s bad to track regularities; I said that you can’t be neutral about what causation is if you’re making causal claims. So one way to parse the question here is: “Can I track regularities even if I have no idea what I would mean if I were to use the word ‘cause’?”

The answer to that question is yes: you can track regularities without knowing what you would mean if you were to use the word “cause.” Though if you honestly don’t have any idea of what you yourself would mean by the word “cause,” were you to use it, then you probably shouldn’t use it. Happily, if you aren’t in the business of making
causal claims, then you won’t need to. Instead of saying “This causes that,” you can just say “This, that.”

Of course, the statement “This, that” is different from the statement “This causes that.” The first statement doesn’t have a verb, and it isn’t meant to be a causal claim. If, later, you decide that you do know what you yourself mean by the word “cause,” and that what you mean by it is “the fact of regular succession,” well -- then you won’t be neutral about it anymore.

At that point the question will be “Why can’t I be a passivist about causation?” One answer will be that it’s a weakness of the position that, if you’re a passivist, adding the verb back in doesn’t get you any extra meaning. You can insist: “No, really: this, that all the time!” But that’s the best you can do. If you believe in causal powers, by contrast, you can say that the statement “This, that all the time” is true either because this produces that, this makes it be the case that that, or because some other thing productively causes the conjunction itself, in virtue of its powers.

Also, one might think that in addition to having the problem of being merely a dogmatic assertion, a dogmatic assertion of regularity is not actually an explanation.

8a7. One last. I thank my friend Irem Kurtsal Steen for this one. “Why can’t I just say ‘What I mean by causation is <whatever the philosophers with the correct theory of causation say I should mean>’?”

There is nothing wrong with appreciating the good work done by philosophers. So taking one’s cue from the metaphysicians with the right theory of causation is not the worst plan that one could have. And, you know, the powers-based view is the right one! But if it turns out that you mean what the neo-Aristotelians say you should mean (or even what the passivists mean), well, then, you aren’t neutral after all. You mean something by “causes,” just like I said you did.

But that’s not really the move that’s being made here. The move here is to offer a formal rather than substantive answer to the question “What do you mean to be telling me about the world, when you tell me that this causes that?” The idea is that by saying “I mean whatever I
should mean,” you can insist that you do too mean something by “causes,” but you don’t have to commit to what that is.

It’s kind of a clever move. But the problem is that – substantively, at least – saying “I mean whatever I should mean, though I have no idea what that is” is no different from saying “All I know is that I mean something; beyond that, it’s a blank.” And that, substantively, pretty much amounts to not knowing what you mean.

We can imagine the response: “Ok, fine. I don’t know what I mean when I say ‘X causes Y,’ & I admit that that sounds bad, but I do know this: no matter what causation turns out to be, the sentence ‘X causes Y’ is going to turn out to be true.” (Thanks to my friend Elizabeth Foreman for this line of defense.) But the counter reply to that will be “How come?” And it won’t be possible to explain why – well, other than saying “It just will be” – without saying “Because X really does cause Y” and meaning something by “really does cause.” Indeed, if you want to get all analytic about it, it looks as though the only way that the claim: “x causes y’ will be true no matter how we define causation” will itself be true is if x is thought to be a productive, powers-based cause of y. If x, y is just an ordered pair, then “x causes y” might not turn out to be true if the powers-based account of causation turns out to be the right one.

8b. So that’s the thing. If you’re in the business of constructing causal explanations, then you just already do mean something when you use the verb “to cause.” If what you mean can be stated without the use of activity-terms, without reference to powers-to-do, then you’re a passivist. If what you mean is that something is actually doing something, or bringing something about, then you’re not; if you mean that, then you believe in powers.

9. Now for the good news. I’m mostly preaching to the choir here, but the good news is that there’s no shame in meaning something by it, when you use the word “to cause” -- and also that there’s no shame in meaning by it what most people actually do mean by it, which is that something, having the ability to do so, brought about something else about. Something did something.

9a. You’re in perfectly good company, historically speaking, if you think that. And it doesn’t require you to think anything pre-scientific. You don’t need for salt to be a conscious agent, for example, to believe that it has the
power to melt ice, or for it to have any Big Plans for itself, other than to be salt. There is also plenty of good contemporary company around nowadays, at least amongst analytic philosophers who do metaphysics and philosophy of science. And of course Roy advanced a powers-based view in RTS.

9b. To be clear, I haven’t made an argument against passivism here. My claim was only that if you’re in the business of explaining why things happen, then you’re already deploying a concept of causation. The only question is which one.

10. Let me close with just a few examples of some other things that are hard to talk about, if you think that the real world is like a flip-book. I’ll mostly stick to some of the issues that I addressed in the book. It’s just a list, here, but I want you to see how it goes.

- First and foremost is agency itself. Even involuntary motion is peculiar, if you have to think of it as a sequence of static time-slice frames.
- Second, agential control or executive function also becomes very hard to conceptualize, once one takes on the passivist picture. There’s a whole chapter on powers and free will in the book, and I’ve written some more on it since, so I’m happy to elaborate.
- Similarly, there can’t be any real capabilities – a la Martha Nussbaum, say, or even Marx – if there aren’t real powers. It follows that there is nothing about human beings that could be thwarted, or stunted or turned against ourselves. So: no phenomena such as alienation or reification.
- Also, nothing like an “energetic personality,” a la John Stuart Mill – no “drives” period, unless you mean by “drive” a sequence of static stills just like any other. It’s hard to conceptualize creativity, too, if the world really is like a flip-book.
- This list goes on. I’ll end with one last example, which isn’t in the book. It’s this. If there are no such things as real causal powers, then the central category of Capital – namely, value – loses its meaning. Value is reified, alienated, abstract human activity. There is no way to transpose this into a passivist register and keep Marx’s analysis of the fetishism of commodities and the secret thereof.

I’ll leave it at that. Thanks very much.