The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Department of Philosophy
2026-27 Term 1

PHIL5180/ PHIL7180
Special Seminar on Selected Philosophical Issues

Actual Causation and Causal Selection

Course Outline

Teacher: Prof. Christopher Hitchcock
Schedule: Fridays 2:30-5:15pm
Venue: 204, T.C. Cheng Building (UCC_204)

Description: Traditional theories of causation, such as Lewis's counterfactual theory, are "egalitarian": while recognizing that people often single out one cause (or a few causes) as *the* cause of event, they maintain that all events that meet the criteria of the theory are causes in the true philosophical sense. For example, when asked what caused a forest fire, most people would point to the lightning strike that triggered it, but not to the oxygen in the atmosphere. Nonetheless, according the egalitarian view, the oxygen is just as much a cause of the fire as the lightning strike.

Recently, this egalitarian view has come under pressure from different sources. First, empirical research in psychology and experimental philosophy has uncovered systematic patterns in people's choices of causal attribution. Second, philosophers as well as scientists working on causal modeling methods have identified "actual causation" as a distinctive causal concept: It is the concept that has been the primary target of philosophical analysis, and it is the concept that is in play when people make causal attributions for a specific outcome, but it is not the only causal concept and it does not exhaust the topic of causation.

These developments have led philosophers, psychologists, and computer scientists to search for the function of our concept of actual causation, a function that might be helped, rather than hindered, by the selective practices of ordinary causal attribution.

In this class, we will follow this intellectual trajectory. Readings will be drawn from both the philosophical and the empirical literature.

Readings: Students should complete all of the required readings before each class meeting. Students may read the suggested further readings according to their interest. These may be particularly helpful for the paper assignment.

1st session (2 October 2026)

Required Reading:
Mill, *A System of Logic*, Book III, Chapter V, Sections 1 – 6.
Lewis, "Causation"
McGrath, "Causation by Omission: A Dilemma"

Suggested Further Reading:
Hitchcock, "The Intransitivity of Causation Revealed in Equations and Graphs"
Lewis, "Void and Object"

Beebee, “Causing and Nothingness”

2nd session (9 October 2026)

Required Reading:
Alicke, “Culpable Causation”
Knobe and Fraser, “Causal Judgment and Moral Judgment: Two Experiments”
Hitchcock and Knobe, “Cause and Norm”

Suggested Further Reading:
Cushman, Knobe, and Sinnott-Armstrong, “Moral Appraisals Affect Doing/Allowing Judgments”
Lombrozo, “Causal-Explanatory Pluralism: How Intentions, Functions, and Mechanisms Influence Causal Ascriptions”
Hitchcock, “Portable Causal Dependence: A Tale of Consilience”

3rd session (16 October 2026)

Required Reading:
Kominsky et al., “Causal Superseding”
Icard, Kominsky, and Knobe, “Normality and Actual Causal Strength”
Quillien and Lucas, “Counterfactuals and the Logic of Causal Selection”

Suggested Further Reading:
Livengood, Sytsman and Rose, “Following the FAD: Folk Attributtions and Theories of Actual Causaiton”
Morris et al, “Quantitative Causal Selection Patterns in Token Causation”
Halpern and Hitchcock, “Graded Causation and Defaults”

4th session (23 October 2026)

Required Reading:
Hitchcock, “Actual Causation: What’s the Use?”
D’Amico, “An Interventionist Approach to Causal Selection: The Optimal Control Hypothesis”

Suggested Further Reading:
Blanchard and Schaffer, “Cause without Default”
Morris et al., “Judgments of Actual Causation Approximate the Effectiveness of Interventions”
Fischer, “Actual Causation and the Challenge of Purpose”

Requirements:

The work for the course shall consist of the reading, participation in classroom discussion, and submission of a final paper on a topic to be developed in consultation with the instructor.

Grade Descriptors:
Please refer to: http://phil.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/~phidept/UG/Grade_descriptors.pdf

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Academic honesty and plagiarism
Attention is drawn to University policy and regulations on honesty in academic work, and to the disciplinary guidelines and procedures applicable to breaches of such policy and regulations. Details may be found at

http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/

For assignments in the form of a computer-generated document that is principally text-based and submitted via VeriGuide, the statement, in the form of a receipt, will be issued by the system upon students' uploading of the soft copy of the assignment. Assignments without the receipt will not be graded by teachers. Only the final version of the assignment should be submitted via VeriGuide.

Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools in Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Use of generative AI tools

Approach 2 - Use of some AI tools is allowed or

- While doing the readings in preparation for each class, students should NOT use AI to summarize the readings.
- While doing the readings, students MAY use AI to explain unfamiliar terms or concepts and to provide summaries of papers referred to in the readings
- Students should complete a draft of their final paper WITHOUT using AI
- Once they have a complete draft, they MAY use AI to correct grammar, spelling, word usage, etc.
- Students should NOT use AI to generate any of the content of their papers.