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Contrasts, counterfactuals, and causes

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Abstract

There is growing debate concerning the nature of causation in political science. In comparative politics and International Relations, scholars are divided by probabilistic, mechanistic, and conditions-based definitions of 'cause.' Moreover, post-positivist approaches to political science increasingly eschew causal analysis altogether. This article argues that the source of these divisions is methodological, not philosophical. Using the example of the Cuban missile crisis, a contrastive, counterfactual approach to causation, where a cause exists when the occurrence of one event rather than another leads to one event rather than another, meets the intuitions and the practice of political scientists engaged in different methodological approaches with different purposes. A contrastive, counterfactual account meets the intuitions of scholars engaged in quantitative and qualitative methods, and captures many of the intuitions guiding debates within qualitative and interpretive methods. By developing a common, unified approach to a key philosophical division, it is easier to identify the differences that matter.

Keywords

agent–structure problem, constitutive theory, epistemology, International Relations, methodology, ontology

Introduction

In August 1962, the Soviet Union unloaded its first nuclear rockets in Cuba. Almost two months later, an American U-2 detected the rockets and the Cuban missile crisis began. International Relations (IR) scholars have been wrangling over the causes of the crisis

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ever since. Did Kennedy's weak performance at the Vienna Summit and in the Bay of Pigs invite the crisis by portraying himself as unresolved to deter Soviet aggression (e.g. Orme, 1987)? What national security discourse constituted the introduction of missiles as a vital threat to US interests (Weldes, 1996)? What role did counterfactual reasoning play in the Kennedy administration's decision-making (Lebow and Stein, 1996: 124–125)? Did standard operating procedures contribute to the crisis by placing US and Soviet forces on a dangerous autopilot (Allison and Zelikow, 1999)?

These empirical questions, unfortunately, are not the only source of debate concerning the causes of the crisis. Rather than debating the salience of different causal accounts much of the debate focuses on what it means to be a 'cause'. Within positivist and scientific realist approaches to political science, some scholars argue that causes are events or properties that raise the probability of an effect; others argue that an event must be mechanistically linked to an effect; and others argue that causes must be necessary conditions for an effect. The nature of causation has also created a divide between positivist and post-positivist approaches, with the latter focusing on constitutive instead of causal relationships.

Advocating a position concerning causation has become a marker of one's position on a range of theoretical, methodological, and empirical issues. Advocates of statistical models, for example, often argue that causes are probability-raisers, whereas advocates of comparative case studies argue that causation is related to necessary conditions. Both of these camps argue that causal analysis is important for the social sciences, whereas post-positivist researchers deny that either approach can make sense of politics as an open system or cultural system.[1]

While theoretical, methodological, and empirical divides in political science are very real, I argue that causation should not be one of them. All political scientists share a set of intuitions related to causation that are immune to theoretical, methodological, or empirical bias: causes are counterfactual difference-makers. A careful, nuanced reading of contrastive, counterfactual accounts of causation not only overcomes our disciplinary debates which have little to do with the substance of international politics, but perhaps more importantly leads to better research questions and more focused causal explanations.

The following analysis of causation focuses on the Cuban missile crisis. The missile crisis is one of the most studied events in world history, and a range of arguments from a host of perspectives have taken positions on its causes. Through this lens, the first half of this article makes the case for a counterfactual theory of causation as a bridge between positions in the positive approach to political science. At present, there is no agreed-upon definition of cause in political science; instead, there are warring accounts of causes. This debate, created by diverse methodological approaches to political science, has created a divided intuition about what causes are. To bridge the divide, one must shift from a methods-centered discussion of causes to a question-centered approach. Whereas we cannot agree on the methods for determining causation, we can agree on the questions for which causes are answers. In particular, contrastive why-questions ('Why p rather than q?') focus explanations on the types of causes that IR scholars believe provide causal explanations. I outline a contrastive, counterfactual account of causation where c is a cause of e if, counterfactually c^* would cause e^*.

The second half of the article goes further. Not only do many questions related to causation within the positive approach to the social sciences become moot, but if the positive element of political science moves to a counterfactual account of causation, then the debate between positivist and post-positivist scholars over causation also becomes moot. Through an analysis of Jutta Weldes' account of the Cuban missile crisis, I show that 'how-possible' questions are more appropriately recast as contrastive why-questions to which contrastive, counterfactual answers are given.

In sum, our disciplinary differences might relate to the relative importance we place on different questions, our value orientations, or the methods we use to make causal claims, but our differences should have nothing to do with causation itself. In making this argument, I focus on (IR) scholarship to focus attention on a specific set of cases; the argument, however, is applicable to political science more generally. While focusing on IR, I draw on probabilistic and conditions-based definitions of causation often used in the study of American and comparative politics, in addition to the often wider concerns in IR.

I want to avoid confusion by saying what I am not arguing. I am not arguing that contrastive why-questions are the only form that research questions in political science should take. There are interesting questions related to description, moral evaluation, measurement, and categorization that are not causal in nature and therefore have different forms. Moreover, I am not arguing that ontological questions do not matter. A response to a contrastive why-question may require, in part, an elaborate description — akin to that favored by scientific realists — emphasizing causal processes, mechanisms, and social kinds. Likewise, a response may take the form of a simple description of a correlation thought to adequately explain a contrast. In other words, having a common language of cause does not mean that philosophy of science debates have no use: I do not take a position in these debates. Most importantly, I am not arguing that every field should rely on contrastive why-questions as a clue to causation, and therefore I am certainly not proposing to offer a unified definition of causation. Scholars in quantum mechanics, for example, may work in such a radically different area that contrastive why-questions hold no value. My claim is modest: most practical research questions in political science, especially in the study of international politics, traditionally take the form of 'Why *p* rather than *q*?', and this might be used as a basis for a common account of causal explanation.

By separating causal statements from other intricate issues in the philosophy of science, this article makes four important contributions. The first two contributions relate to the question of philosophical method. Social scientists, including IR scholars, debate philosophical questions often without discussing methods for settling philosophical disputes. Understanding different ways to tackle problems, such as 'What is a cause?', is crucial to making forward progress. I suggest a novel method within IR scholarship for settling disputes over causation. Focusing on research questions that demand causal explanations is a clue to what types of causal statements should be given in response. Two additional contributions relate to 'causation' itself. I elaborate an account of contrastive, counterfactual causal statements that meets these demands and, in doing so, I develop common ground between some 'positivist' and some 'post-positivist' approaches to social science research by highlighting good work in both traditions that relies on the same type of causal talk.

Standards for evaluating accounts

There are many theories of causation. Different scholars argue that causes raise the probability of effects (Gerring, 2005), are events linked by causal mechanisms to effects (Little, 1991), or are necessary conditions for effects (Mahoney, 2008). Many post-positivist scholars claim that their work is distinctive, in part, because it avoids causal analysis. David Campbell (1998: 4), for example, explains that his work is interested in interpretation rather than explanation, where the latter is characterized by causal analysis; Alexander Wendt (1998) distinguishes between causation and constitution; and Hollis and Smith (1990) differentiate between an interpretive science that searches for understanding and a positive science that searches for explanation (causation).

Despite the proliferation of discussions of causation, and the centrality of causation to disciplinary divides within political science, there is surprisingly little interest in asking *how do we judge accounts of causation?* Neglecting this question comes with a significant cost. An important traditional philosophical method relies on shared intuitions among a community about the meaning of causality. Yet, in political science, our community does not have recourse to this traditional solution; differences in methodological training and practice prevent a shared intuition about what causes are. This section argues that without reconstructing our causal intuitions, there is no sense in judging causal accounts.

In political science, most approaches to debating theories of causation resemble attrition warfare. When political scientists debate causation, they criticize alternative accounts without attempting to develop a common intuition about what causation is. John Gerring (2005), an advocate of probabilistic reasoning, and James Mahoney (2008), an advocate of a variant of necessary and sufficient conditions, each claim that the other's account is reducible to their own. More often, alternative accounts are criticized as incoherent, outdated, or naive (George and Bennett, 2005; Kurki, 2008). Some political scientists arbitrarily reserve the term 'causation' to refer to certain types of relationship, claiming that other forms of analysis are separate but equal. Hollis and Smith (1990), for example, separate explanation, as a causal domain marked by positive science, from understanding, as an interpretive domain. These discussions of causality show logical problems with the others' accounts or claim that certain methods point to certain accounts. Unsurprisingly, every account has logical problems, has been criticized in various philosophical literatures, and is considered by its opponents to be unsuitable for political analysis.

The method of evaluating causal claims in political science is strikingly different from that pursued in the philosophy of causation. In the philosophy of science, it is not enough to criticize alternative accounts; one shows that a specific account makes more sense than another in capturing what we mean by cause. It is a problem-solving, not problem-creating, approach. John Collins et al. (2004: 30–39) explain that when using accounts by intuitions, (a) a philosopher gives an account of causation (e.g. causes are probability-raisers) and shows that it meets with our intuitions in a broad range of cases. Critics then (b) propose cases where the prior account does not accord with our intuitions, and (c) the original model is either refined or abandoned. The standard for evaluating accounts of causation is how well an account handles our common-sense intuitions about what causes are.[2]

The philosophy of causation presumes that a community shares intuitions about what causes are and uses canonical examples to show how well different accounts meet these intuitions. One evaluates accounts based on their ability to make sense of things as causes for those things we want to say are causes. We do not want to say, for example, that nuclear weapons are the cause of the Cuban missile crisis. Yet, nuclear weapons raised the probability of and were necessary conditions for the crisis, and the development of nuclear weapons relates to mechanisms through which conflict over Cuba nearly escalated into war. In the philosophy of causation, one tries to develop an account of causation that excludes intuitive non-causes, such as nuclear weapons, while including intuitive causes, such as concerns about Kennedy's reputation or the dynamics of crisis escalation.

At present, political scientists do not pursue this approach. Many are quick to move to the second step, criticizing accounts of causation, without moving through the first step, trying to show how accounts meet the community's intuitions. I suspect the reason is that we have deeply divided intuitions about what causality means.

The political science community, steeped in debates over methods, does not admit to shared intuitions about causation. This has emerged from our methods training. From graduate school on, scholars are often deeply immersed in the study of specific types of methods relying on different inferential tools. These tools are not equal. Statistical techniques for causal inference are helpful for demonstrating probabilistic explanations of social phenomena or explaining their mean causal effects (Holland, 1986; Suppes, 1970). Qualitative techniques for causal inference, such as process-tracing and the methods of agreement and difference, by contrast, are helpful in understanding necessary and sufficient conditions (George and Bennett, 2005).

It is a safe sociological bet that learning and practice in both traditions shape IR scholars' causal intuitions (Mahoney, 2008: 2–3; Mahoney and Goertz, 2006). I cannot prove this bet here, but there are two reasons to wager it is true. First, many discussions of causality are found in methods books (e.g. George and Bennett, 2005: 137; King et al., 1994: 85–86). Any good discussion of the methods we use to infer causality should come with a discussion about what causality is. In general, however, the intense study of techniques, accompanied with claims that they are 'causal,' likely shapes scholars' and students' intuitions about what causality is and why we study it. Second, there are likely biases, intended or unintended, at work. The term 'cause' has a prestige status in the social sciences. Claiming that a specific methodological approach has the ability to generate 'causal' explanations while others are simply constant conjunctions (Kurki, 2008) or description (King et al., 1994) is to make a judgment concerning the merit of others' work.

I find it dubious that there is a common intuition left regarding the notion of cause in political science scholarship. Appealing to a common, unreconstructed intuition of what causes are is not helpful.[3] Sociological divisions within our discipline mean that any discussion of cause that is linked to the way we conduct research is incapable of generating a satisfactory account. There is no method through which political science, as an unreconstructed field, is capable of generating an even partial answer. There are no grounds for one side in the causality debate to 'win' because there is no common measure — no scoring system — for what constitutes a winning argument. Determining what causes are, at present, is impossible.

Three approaches are taken to bridge divides over causation. The first approach admits that our discipline has divided intuitions about causation and adopts a pluralistic definition of 'cause,' accepting multiple types of analysis (e.g. causal effects and causal mechanisms) as incommensurate responses to different kinds of research questions. The pluralistic approach is appealing because it incorporates a broad range of theoretical and methodological perspectives. Furthermore, there are philosophical grounds for pluralism: many philosophers acknowledge that causal mechanisms and causal effects refer to different elements of our causal thinking (Hitchcock, 2001; Reiss, 2007, 2009; Sober, 1984). Pluralism, however, comes with a risk. Pluralists often hope that admitting multiple species of explanation to count as causes will broaden the field; however, it is equally likely that admitting pluralism and eschewing the attempt to reconstruct a common conception of cause will deepen division. A similar attempt to broaden the field, through the Perestroika debate, led to acrimony and tension without reaching consensus on a pluralistic approach (Bennett, 2002a, 2002b; Kasza, 2001; Kremer, 2002; Libby, 2002; Werlin, 2002). There is little reason to expect a pluralistic account of causality to fare better.

A second approach turns away from our intuitions concerning what causation is (the ordinary language approach) to actual causes in the social and natural world. This approach, shared by many scientific and critical realists, has effectively broadened the concept of causation to include interesting relationships. Milja Kurki (2008), for example, suggests adopting the fourfold Aristotelian typology of causation — material, efficient, formal, and final — to handle different aspects of causal relations. Approaches such as Kurki's are laudable for cataloguing types of interesting relationships. A key difficulty in this approach, however, is justifying causal talk. What is gained by treating material, efficient, formal, and final 'influences' under the heading 'causal'? What do these types of relationship have in common such that we define them as members of a single category — causation — and what definition includes just those four kinds of relations but excludes others?

A third approach attempts a reconstruction of our intuitions regarding causation. This is the method I pursue. If we do not have recourse to an unreconstructed common-sense understanding of cause, then we need to generate one. The difficulty is finding a common basis for doing so. While we differ over what we mean by cause, I argue that one clue for how a reconstruction may be possible is that we agree that certain research questions, contrastive why-questions, demand causal explanation. By moving from question to concept to method, we can reconstruct what we mean by cause and, only then, develop methods conducive to causal analysis.

Requesting causes

The previous section argued that political science as a field has divided intuitions about causation. To develop a common account, we need to develop common intuitions. How does one develop a common intuition about causation? Turning to methods is not helpful. On the one hand, IR scholars are more methodologically divided than they are by accounts of causation; on the other hand, one cannot be sure what methods are suitable for causal inference unless one knows what 'causal' means. This section shows that turning to research questions, in particular, contrastive why-questions, provides a means of

generating a common intuition concerning causation: political scientists can agree that contrastive why-questions are intuitive requests for causal explanations. The first part details the relationship between research questions and causal inference, and the second part suggests a contrastive account of appropriate research questions.

The following discussion emphasizes single cases. This, however, does not rig the 'causation game' in favor of qualitative methods. Most discussions of the nature of causation begin with discussions of specific examples, and then expand to analyze populations. Moreover, the account of causation that I develop, as I suggest in the conclusion to this section, is easily extended to probabilistic accounts of cause, relying on quantitative tools for inference. More importantly, I want to focus on a single example — the Cuban missile crisis — because it has been approached by scholars from a variety of traditions, each of which has interesting things to say about the crisis. One could easily substitute 'Why do democratic dyads not fight?' as an example of a probabilistic question.

Research questions and causal inference

Political scientists have long noted the relationship between research questions and causal explanation. Gary King et al. (1994: 16–18) argue that research questions should request explanations (e.g. causal responses), and Alexander Wendt (1998: 104) explains that these requests for explanation take the form of 'why-questions.' When one asks, 'Why did Kennedy implement a blockade?' or 'Why do democratic nations rarely fight wars against one another?', one expects a causal response. The traditional reason for emphasizing research questions is largely pedagogical. Highlighting appropriate forms of research questions focuses scholars on important dependent variables (e.g. Kennedy's decision-making) and topics of interest (e.g. the missile crisis).

I argue that research questions may serve another important purpose, providing a clue to what is expected from causal inference in political science. Focusing on research questions may be a first step toward developing an account of causation, but only if the form of the request is precise. Asking why-questions — 'Why *p*?' — is not enough because many why-questions are not requests for causal explanation. Rhetorical questions like 'Why did we get ourselves into this mess?' take the why-question form without requesting causal explanation (Salmon, 2006: 136–137). Other questions are requests for moral evaluations, such as 'Why should we commute the sentences of persons who are not mentally capable of understanding their actions?' Moreover, other why-questions are scientific but not causal. When one asks why something is measured in a certain way — 'Why is France a democracy?' — or questions of import — 'Why is the study of missile crises important?' — one expects scientific responses that are not causal.[4]

Beyond these semantic concerns with why-questions, there is a much more significant problem with why-questions that is more intimately related to causal explanation. Many questions, such as 'What caused the great wars of modern times?' (Van Evera, 1999: 1) or 'Why have nuclear weapons not been used in war since 1945?' (Tannenwald, 2007: 2), request trouble more than explanation. All events or groups of events have long and elaborate causal histories; to isolate some part of that history and refer to it as causal is always an arbitrary process. David Lewis (1986: 214–215), in reference to a car crash, explains that even the entire list of proximate causes — 'the icy road, the bald tire, the

drunk driver, the blind corner, the approaching cause, and more' — does not exhaust the list of potential causes. 'Each of these causes in turn has its causes; and those too are causes of the crash. So in turn are their causes, and so, perhaps, *ad infinitum*. The crash is the culmination of countless distinct, converging causal chains.'

Which elements of causal histories do we isolate as causes? Two common solutions are to exclude less salient causes or to exclude causes that are remote and hard to measure. These solutions, I argue, raise important methodological issues involved in responding to why-questions, but they do not serve as appropriate guides to understanding what types of questions demand causal explanation.

IR scholars have long been interested in finding an objective method for assessing whether events are causes. Some scholars have suggested methods for evaluating the salience of different causes (Braumoeller and Goertz, 2000). For a population of crashes, for example, drunk drivers might be a better predictor of crashes than blind corners; therefore, drunk drivers are a more salient cause. Techniques for determining salience, however, do not respond to demands for causal explanation. When one asks 'What are the causes of the Cuban missile crisis?', one wants the full list, not just salient causes. If cold air creates ice on a bridge, leading to a crash, then it is a cause of the crash even if ice does not always develop when cold air crosses a bridge? Less salient causes are still causes and should figure in explanation.

Another solution is to exclude causes that are remote and hard to measure (Fearon, 1991: 190). In Fearon's example, the wars in the 20th century might not have occurred if Cleopatra's nose had been shorter. In answering 'Why did the Cuban missile crisis occur?', we need not go as far back as Cleopatra. The division of Germany in the 1940s was a cause of the missile crisis (because it was a cause of the Cold War) and Khrushchev's birth was a cause (because Khrushchev ousted Beria, who favored improved relations with the West). Even the voter fraud that contributed to Kennedy's election was a cause (because Nixon's election would have deterred Soviet adventurism).[5] In fact, this is only the tip of the iceberg. One reason the missile crisis was a *crisis* was the delay in the US detection of the missiles. If Kennedy had known weeks earlier, his administration would have had more time to consider a response. The delay was partly caused by infighting over sending a U-2 over Cuba. China had shot down a U-2 a month earlier, McCone (an ardent supporter of the flight) was on his honeymoon, and there was internal squabbling over whether the Air Force or CIA should run the U-2 program. Had China not shot down the U-2, had McCone remained a bachelor, or had the Air Force taken the program from the CIA a month earlier, the missile crisis may never have been a crisis.[6]

Fearon suggests that we should not allow Cleopatra's nose-type causes because they are difficult to assess. How do we know what would have happened if McCone had not gone on honeymoon or if he had stayed away from Washington longer? The next section discusses this problem at greater length. Fearon is right to discount Cleopatra's nose because it is unverifiable, but that does not mean that other remote events are not causes of modern political phenomena. Many classic studies in political science, contra Fearon, use long-forgotten historical events and processes to explain contemporary phenomena such as the class origins of democracy and dictatorship (Moore, 1966) or the relationship between types of government established during colonial rule and types of government created during post-colonial periods (Mamdani, 1996).

The critical problem with Cleopatra's nose-type problems is that when we ask a causal question rarely do we expect a Cleopatra's nose-type response. When asking 'Why did the car crash?', no one wants a description of the causal chain that culminated in cold weather leading to icy roads leading the car to skid. Similarly, when asking 'Why did the First World War happen?', one usually does not want a description of ancient European history, culminating in the German state, making possible a German invasion of France. Cleopatra's nose-type causes are often (not always) uninteresting, even trivial, and do not point to interesting elements of a causal explanation. The problem is not that they are hard to measure; even if one can demonstrate them, they are usually not the type of causal explanation we want.

Cleopatra's nose-type explanations are bad explanations because they respond to bad questions. When one asks 'Why did the Cuban missile crisis happen?', almost any response related to any part of any causal chain leading to the missile crisis provides an element of a response. Ambiguous why-questions allow trivia because they are ambiguous.

Contrastive why-questions

In contrast to simple why-questions, where one asks 'Why *p*?', I suggest that most appropriate requests for causal explanation take the form 'Why *p* rather than *q*?' After outlining the form contrastive why-questions take, I suggest several advantages of their form for understanding causal inference.

Contrastive why-questions eliminate the problems associated with ambiguous why-questions. Peter Lipton (1990), in a celebrated essay, argues that most requests for causal explanation are better understood as requests for causal explanations of contrastive outcomes. Instead of asking, 'Why did Khrushchev send missiles into Cuba in 1962?', one should ask 'Why did Khrushchev send missiles into Cuba in 1962 instead of 1967?', or 'Why did Khrushchev send missiles into Cuba in 1962 rather than sending strictly defensive weapons?', or 'Why did Khrushchev send non-camouflaged missiles into Cuba instead of camouflaged missiles?' These contrastive why-questions take the form 'Why *p* rather than *q*?'[7] In philosophical terminology, *p* is the fact and *q* is the foil.

Contrastive why-questions focus research on interesting elements of causal explanation and avoid Cleopatra's nose-type explanations. Instead of asking 'Why did the Cuban missile crisis occur?', for which Khrushchev's birth or the Cold War or nuclear weapons or Kennedy's performance at the Vienna summit could all figure as part of the causal explanation, one might instead ask 'Why did Khrushchev decide to send missiles into Cuba in the fall of 1962 rather than waiting until after the Soviet Union closed the missile gap?' The contrastive why-question focuses attention on a specific set of causes, screening off non-explanatory responses. The Cold War, for example, does not explain the timing of the crisis because it drives incentives to send missiles into Cuba in both periods. Similarly, Khrushchev's birth is causally relevant to his making a decision (because Khrushchev's ability to make a decision counterfactually depends on his birth) but not to his making one decision rather than another.

By screening off non-explanatory responses, contrastive why-questions focus research on politically and theoretically important causal explanations. Choosing contrastive questions means choosing the puzzle that interests the researcher, and using that puzzling

variation on a 'dependent variable' to motivate the search for causal explanations. 'Why did the German and French military believe an offensive military strategy would be successful rather than realizing defense was dominant in the early 20th century?' and 'Would Germany have attacked France if it had realized defense was dominant (rather than believing defense was futile)?' point to a specific set of causal variables that explain the European cult of the offensive. Furthermore, asking 'Why did Khrushchev believe that Kennedy lacked resolve instead of believing Kennedy would stand firm on Cuba?' points to theoretically important claims about the importance of reputation to deterrence and provides practical lessons for policymakers. Specific, contrastive questions screen off bad explanations and focus research on the types of responses we are looking for.[8]

Asking successive why-questions might provide the best approach to understanding the causal dynamics of historical events in their richest details. Contrastive why-questions, like a microscope, zoom in on theoretically important questions, whereas simple why-questions risk losing important trees in the forest. Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow (1999) pursue this approach to the Cuban missile crisis. Rather than asking 'What caused the missile crisis?', they ask a series of questions best described as contrastive why-questions. For example, in evaluating claims that the Soviet incursion was a probe, they ask, 'Why launch a provocative probe in 1962 rather than later?' When evaluating claims that the Soviet introduction was intended to close the missile gap, they ask, 'Why did he feel he could not wait two or three years for his ICBM to become much larger and more formidable?' When evaluating Soviet standard operating procedures, they ask, 'Why did Soviet commanders, who took extraordinary pains to camouflage the transport of missiles to Cuba, choose not to camouflage the missiles during their installation (rather than camouflaging them as they would other weapons)?' and 'Why did the Soviet military commanders not reveal operational military weapons in Cuba, rather than revealing them to deter a US assault?' (Allison and Zelikow, 1999: 99, 208, 217). Each question hones in on specific dynamics that contributed to the Cuban missile crisis, permitting a focus on specific elements of theoretically and practically important causal chains that culminated in the crisis in a way not afforded by simple why-questions.

Emphasizing contrastive why-questions as important for causal explanation is a first step toward an adequate account of causes in debates over foreign policy decision-making. Contrastive why-questions highlight variation and puzzling phenomena and enable detection of salient causes. As a community, I suspect we can agree that contrastive why-questions almost always require causal explanations. If true, this is an important step toward developing a common account of cause in IR.

A contrastive, counterfactual analysis of causation

In the previous section, I argued that political science can take clues concerning causation from contrastive why-questions. Using contrastive why-questions to steer toward a consensus definition of causation, this section outlines a contrastive, counterfactual definition of causation. I first discuss shortcomings with simple counterfactuals, showing how they mirror problems with simple why-questions, and then explain why contrastive counterfactuals avoid these problems.

Simple counterfactuals

Counterfactual theories in IR scholarship have received significant methodological attention. Crucial questions relate to measuring counterfactuals using statistical and qualitative techniques, and the plausibility of asking certain types of counterfactual question (e.g. Levy, 2008; Tetlock and Belkin, 1996). Unfortunately, despite the methodological attention to counterfactuals, there has been no attention to the relationship of counterfactuals and causation. Not all counterfactual claims are causal claims, but all causal claims seem to require counterfactual analysis.[9] Discussing methods and counterfactuals without first asking what types of counterfactuals are causal in nature puts the cart before the horse.

In political science, the extant treatment of counterfactuals and causation is binary. Ned Lebow (2000: 561) adopts this view: 'if we hypothesize x caused y, we assume that y would not have happened in the absence of x — ceteris paribus.' Fearon (1991) shows that this form of counterfactual analysis is important for statistical and small-*n* causal inference. The conventional approach is binary because it is only interested in two events (the cause and the effect) and is not explicitly cast in terms of contrastive possibilities. This approach is strict because it is transposable into the language of necessity: it is not possible that *y* and not-*x* occurs (or if *y*, then *x*) (Lewis, 2001: 4–13). I refer to this strict binary account, where *c* causes *e* if and only if not-*c* then not-*e*, as a strict, counterfactual account of causation.[10]

Several philosophical and methodological problems with strict counterfactuals mirror problems with simple why-questions. The strict counterfactual theory is prone to a severe form of Cleopatra's nose-type problems because it treats every proximate element of a causal history as a cause. The Cuban missile crisis, for example, depends on the existence of Cuba, the existence of missiles, and hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union (which created the atmosphere of crisis). Counterfactually, if there were no Cuba, no missiles, or no Cold War, there would be no Cuban missile crisis. If we are interested in causal explanation, simple counterfactuals seem problematic because they treat intuitive non-causes as causes.

More importantly, a strict account does not exclude proximate effects of common causes from being treated as causes (akin to the problem of spurious correlation). If *d* and *e* are effects of a common cause *c*, but *d* precedes *e*, then a strict counterfactual theory treats *d* as a cause of *e* because, counterfactually, no *d* implies no *e*. The Soviet decision to install the missiles during the day, for example, caused Soviet engineers to sweat profusely and also caused the missiles to be detected. The strict account treats sweating profusely as a cause because, if the engineers did not sweat, that would mean the missiles were installed at night, camouflaging their existence.

A strict counterfactual theory also makes it impossible to isolate elements of a causal chain without moving needlessly back into the chain's causal history. The Cuban missile crisis, for example, was a crisis because of the short timeline for decision-making. The short timeline was caused by the delay of the U-2 flight. The delay was in part caused by the loss of a Chinese nationalist U-2 over China. The Chinese nationalist U-2 flight would not have occurred if the United States had not provided U-2s to the Republic of China (ROC). The United States would not have provided U-2s to the ROC if their rivals

had not been communist. The ROC's rivals were communist because Mao came to power. Mao came to power because of a communist movement in China. The communist movement in China would not have been popular if the Soviet Union had not provided aid to China in 1921. The Soviet Union provided aid to China because China asked for it. And, China asked for aid from the Soviet Union because the West ignored Chinese requests. A strict counterfactual account treats the West's refusal to provide aid to China before 1921 as a cause of the missile crisis, along with every other step in the causal history before and after 1921.

The standard way of saving counterfactuals is to adopt methodological rules of thumb. Like Fearon, Tetlock and Belkin (1996) and Lebow (2000) respond to the last objection by arguing that we should not allow the refusal of aid to count as an explanation of the crisis because of possible measurement errors. Tracing history so far back creates impossible measurement problems. This is a version of the 'fundamental problem of causal inference' suggested by King et al. (1994: 79): we cannot be sure what the effect of an event is because we cannot be sure what would have occurred if the event had not taken place. This methodological response is unpersuasive. If one could show that Western aid to China in 1921, with 100% certainty, would have prevented the missile crisis, then strict counterfactual theories treats it as a cause. Yet, no one finds it an interesting explanation for the missile crisis.

Contrastive counterfactuals

Significant philosophical and methodological problems exist with simple counterfactual theories of causation. Even if we admit that every necessary condition is a cause, it is unclear how this type of causal analysis relates to causal explanation. Explanation is a practical, purposive activity, and treating events as causes that do little to answer concrete questions creates problems in understanding the role of the philosophy of science in creating accounts useful in the social sciences.

A contrastive, counterfactual theory of causation is designed to avoid these problems. Several philosophers have recently suggested incorporating contrast classes into counterfactual definitions of causation to meet the demands of contrastive why-questions (e.g. Schaffer, 2005). As Northcott (2008: 111–112) phrases it, causation is when *c*-rather-than-*C** causes *e*-rather-than-*E**, where 'causes' is a relation of counterfactual dependence. The actual and counterfactual terms — c, C*, e, and E* — refer to events, where an event is the existence of some state of affairs (an instance of an action, condition, mechanism, or object).[11] When an event is counterfactually varied, often it means that some aspect of the event occurs differently: a red ball rather than a blue ball emerges from a machine, the moon is set near the earth when gravity exists rather than the moon is set near the earth when gravity does not exist, or I say 'I do' when there is a social rule related to marriage implicating that speech act instead of saying 'I do' without that social rule.[12] A model causal explanation, for example, is that Khrushchev sent nuclear missiles in 1962 (*e*) rather than engaging in a conventional build-up on Cuba (E*) because he wanted to compensate for temporary Soviet weakness (*c*). If Khrushchev had not believed the Soviets to be weak (C*), he would have engaged in a conventional, not nuclear, build-up (E*).

The intuition guiding a contrastive theory of causation is that the identification of causes is context dependent. Events like the Cuban missile crisis are interesting, in part, because they are multifaceted. The complexity of events means that no single question is capable of highlighting all of the causal processes of interest: 'Why did the Soviets not camouflage the missiles rather than leaving them open to aerial surveillance?', 'Why did Khrushchev send missiles into Cuba in 1962 rather than sending missiles after the Soviets closed the missile gap first?', and 'Why did Kennedy keep making connections to Berlin rather than treating Cuba as an isolated crisis?' A contrastive, counterfactual theory of causation emphasizes that no single cause explains the crisis (cf. Dessler, 1991). It is too complex. Instead, the cause we find depends on the elements of the crisis we are interested in: how we construct our research question and the way in which we select contrastive effects creates the causes that we search for (Schaffer, 2005: 342–346). By emphasizing the context-dependent nature of causal explanation, a contrastive, counterfactual account of causation avoids the pitfalls of strict counterfactuals.

A contrastive, counterfactual treatment of causation eliminates unimportant proximate factors. By pointing to specific effects of interest and using contrastive cases where unimportant elements of events are common, contrastive counterfactuals avoid trivial explanations. If one asks 'Why did Khrushchev send missiles into Cuba in 1962?', there are many events a strict counterfactual theory must treat as causes: the existence of missiles, Cuba, Khrushchev, the Cold War, and so on. A contrastive account, in contrast, avoids these trivial explanations because these non-explanatory facts are true for both the factual causal history and its counterfactual foil. If one asks 'Why did the Cuban missile crisis occur in 1962 instead of 1961?', the existence of missiles, Cuba, Khrushchev, and the Cold War are common in both the fact and the foil.

Relying on contrast cases to screen off unimportant elements of explanations focuses debate on crucial questions. Looking at the effects of reputation, one might claim that Kennedy's meeting with Khrushchev at Vienna in 1961, where he was perceived as weak, emboldened Khrushchev to send missiles in 1962. Or, with an eye to deterrence theory, one might claim that Khrushchev sent missiles only after increasing signs that the US military was taking steps to attack Cuba in early 1962, or focus on Cuba's rivalry with China, emphasizing Khrushchev's belief that unless the Soviets moved to help Cuba, Castro might approach Mao (Taubman, 2003: 533–535). Considering global geopolitics, one might argue that Khrushchev's growing concerns over strategic inferiority, prompted by Kennedy's military build-up in Southeast Asia in early 1962, led to the introduction of missiles later in the year (Fursenko and Naftali, 2006: 432–433). Unlike the geological formation of Cuba, however, these explanations are interesting. Contrasting effects effectively highlights elements of causal histories, enabling reasonable explanations based on important parts of a causal explanation (Lewis, 1986: 239–241).

A contrastive, counterfactual account of causation also enables researchers to avoid needlessly backtracking in causal chains, treating every step as a cause. Well-posed research questions can focus attention on specific time periods, screening off Cleoaptra's nose-type causes. If one asks, for example, 'Why was the Cuban missile crisis a crisis (characterized by a short window for a US response)?', a strict counterfactual account of causation treats shooting down the ROC U-2 and the entire chain of events that led to its shooting down as causes. A contrastive, counterfactual account of causation lets us hold

distant elements of the chain constant, enabling us to focus on proximate causes. One might, for example, ask 'Given the state of the world in September 1962, why was the Cuban missile crisis characterized by a short window for a US response rather than having a long time frame?' The contrastive why-question screens off candidate contrastive causal chains because it explicitly rules out causal responses that require manipulating events before September 1962. Using well-crafted questions, one can bound the domain of possible contrastive causes. There is still ample room to debate the role of bureaucratic turf wars, McCone's honeymoon, the effect of nuclear weapons in shortening time horizons, or domestic politics in pushing Kennedy to make snap decisions. Unlike debates about the origins of Chinese communism, however, these debates are confined by purposive inquiry.

Unlike many methodological approaches to counterfactual analysis that prevent using remote events as causes, a contrastive, counterfactual approach also enables a focus on important historical events far from the action of the crisis when called for. For some scholars, distant causes where, as Hannah Arendt (1968: viii) puts it, there is a 'grotesque disparity between cause and effect' are the most interesting. According to Arendt, overproduction in a few countries caused imperialism, which caused a transformation in global political structures. These distant causes of modern phenomena are of particular interest in comparative politics, where long-forgotten causes that occurred centuries before an effect explain modern events. Barrington Moore's (1966) study of the origins of dictatorship and democracy, for example, traces regime type to the fate of the aristocracy and the growth of agriculture. More interesting, Benedict Anderson (1983: 37–46) traces the impact of the printing press, showing that only through the creation of standardized print languages were communities able to communicate and think of themselves as part of a nation.

A contrastive, counterfactual account provides mechanisms for emphasizing distant elements of causal explanation that authors who want to focus on proximate causes would reject (e.g. Fearon, 1991). For example, one could ask 'Given what we know about how history unfolded before and after the French Commune, why did the French military oppose conscription before World War II rather than support it?' Elizabeth Kier (1999: 207) argues that the French Right, who dominated the military, learned from the Commune that a crucial role for the military was to preserve peace at home, and that lengthy training of a smaller force was necessary to detach soldiers from society. The contrastive question not only specifies the actual and hypothetical effects of interest, it also limits the domain of causes to what happened during the French Commune. Contrastive explanation provides a more intuitive way of highlighting these distant explanations as causal, permitting one to treat remote causes as non-trivial when appropriate.

Not only does a contrastive, counterfactual account meet our intuitions about causal explanation, but it can also capture the intuitions that guide other leading approaches to causation. The preceding examples show that contrastive, counterfactual accounts focus attention on specific mechanisms through which a cause is linked to an effect. Many IR scholars engaged in large-*n* quantitative work often suspect that the political world is probabilistic, not deterministic, and emphasize mean causal effects rather than mechanisms. A contrastive, counterfactual account easily travels to a probabilistic world. For example, the question 'Why do democratic dyads fight infrequently?' is

easily transposed into a contrastive question: 'Why do democratic dyads fight less than non-democratic dyads?' Christopher Hitchcock (2001), a staunch defender of probabilism, argues that probabilistic responses usually take the form of contrastive causal explanations: if a particular population of dyads were autocratic (or mixed) rather than democratic, then they would more likely fight wars (rather than less or equally likely).

A contrastive, counterfactual account of cause captures our intuitions about what is needed for causal explanation in positive approaches to political science. While it provides a bridge between camps on causation, it does not bridge divides elsewhere. Political scientists can adopt a common definition of cause without adopting common methodological strategies or substantive focuses. Adopting a common conception of cause focuses debate on these real differences and prevents philosophical debates over the nature of causality from infecting our discussions of more important issues. The next section argues that this is true not only within positive approaches to political science, but also between positive and post-positive approaches.

Post-positivism and causation

The first two-thirds of this article argued for a contrastive, counterfactual definition of causation, showing that this account is an intuitive, philosophically appropriate response to well-posed demands for causal explanations. The first part of this article was confined to discussions largely within 'positivist' social science where the avowed aim is causal inference. This section addresses a second route to division through causation in IR scholarship. At present, there is a significant divide between interpretive and post-positivist researchers interested in constitutive relationships, or thick descriptions of cultures and politics, and positivist researchers interested in causal inference. Adopting a contrastive, counterfactual analysis of causation points to commonalities between these approaches that are unrecognizable unless we use such a model.[13] This does not mean that there are no important differences between these approaches; rather, focusing on the structure of causal statements is not the appropriate place to locate our differences.

The divide between interpretivist and positivist research has many dimensions. Methodologically, interpretivist research often (but not always) concentrates on probing single cases in extended depth, whereas positivist research often (but not always) concentrates on understanding populations. Philosophically, there are divides between scholars working within the traditions of scientific and critical realism who assert the importance of real processes, structures, and relationships, and positivist and pragmatic scholars less concerned with the ontological status of social phenomena. Conceptually, interpretivist scholars are often interested in constitutive relationships, whereas positivist scholars are interested in chains of probabilistic or deterministic causal histories.

In addition to these real differences, to which many more might be added, many post-positivists argue that their camp does not have an interest in addressing causal relationships. Rather than discussing 'Why did *x* occur?', these scholars are interested in asking 'How was *x* possible?' These IR scholars often distinguish between a logic of explanation and a logic of interpretation. David Campbell (1998: 4), for example, argues that explanation requires causal explanations, whereas interpretation investigates the 'manifest consequences of adopting one more of representation over another.'

Furthermore, these scholars often distinguish between constitutive and causal relationships. Alexander Wendt (1998), for example, suggests that there is a difference between causal relationships, in which causes are independent of and precede effects, and constitutive relationships, where there is no independence or time lag between cause and effect. In sum, whereas why-questions ask for the specific causes that determine an outcome, how-possible questions ask for the logical enablers of an outcome (Patomaki and Wight, 2000; Suganami, 2006) or the conditions that make possible a certain set of options (Weldes, 1996).

The first part of this section suggests that translating how-possible questions into contrastive why-questions is usually not only possible, but more importantly improves the precision of the research question. As a consequence, research that responds to most how-possible questions engages in causal explanation in the same way as 'positivist' research if causal explanation is treated as a contrastive, counterfactual relationship. The second section shows how this works by showing that Jutta Weldes' account of the Cuban missile crisis, an exemplar of how-possible questioning, can be translated into contrastive, counterfactual causal language.

How-possible questions

In this section, I suggest that how-possible questions usually are implicit requests for causal explanations, and understanding how they make these requests is essential to providing good responses to research questions. Moreover, translating how-possible questions into contrastive why-questions makes research more precise, highlighting research puzzles of interest.

Scholars working with post-positivist methodologies and approaches to the philosophy of science often argue that they are not engaged in causal theorizing because they ask how-possible questions. Alexander Wendt (1998: 105–106) argues that there is a gap between research focusing on why-questions (where causal inference is sought) and how-possible questions. Jutta Weldes (1996: 291), for example, asks how it was possible for Soviet missiles in Cuba to seem inherently offensive, and for the Kennedy administration to dismiss Soviet claims that they were defensive as deception. And Roxanne Lynn Doty (1993: 299) asks: 'How were particular subjects and modes of subjectivity constituted so as to make possible United States' interventionist policy in the Philippines circa 1950?' These how-possible questions search for explanations about the systems of meaning and structures of power that make certain events possible.

The structural relationship between causal and constitutive statements is similar in one respect: leading advocates of constitutive theories suggest that constitutive relations are similar to causal relations because counterfactual dependence holds — if a condition of possibility varies, so too will its constitutive effects (Wendt, 1998). Yet, despite this crucial similarity, some claim that how-possible and why-questions are fundamentally different. There are three primary arguments for separating how-possible questions, or conditions of possibility arguments, from why-questions: different referents, indeterministic responses, and independence and cause and effect.[14] I consider these in turn.

The first reason often given to disentangle how-possible questions from why-questions is that causes require the independent existence of cause and effect and the cause to

come before the effect (Wendt, 1998: 105). The independence and precedence of cause and effect raise interesting issues, few of which I explore here. There are, however, significant reasons to think that this distinction is not enough to cut a line between how-possible questions and why-questions.

Usually, IR scholars working with how-possible questions are working in areas with independent causes and effects. Most of Wendt's (1998: 105) concrete examples of how-possible questions have independent causes and effects. He asks, for example, 'How is it possible for the Earth to keep the moon in its orbit?' The response — the Earth's gravitational pull (the cause) makes the moon orbit (the effect) — relies on a cause independent of the effect. Similarly, Wendt asks, 'How was it possible for Stalin, a single individual, to exercise so much power over the Soviet people?' There are many straightforward causal explanations for Stalin's power that posit separate causes and effects. The lack of an independent judiciary (the cause), for example, enabled Stalin to use government agencies to terrorize people (the effect), because an independent judiciary would have made Stalin accountable for the terror he imposed. One might object, arguing that responding to the how-possible question is different because one wants a description of the entire social, political, and economic system that maintains Stalin's power. To understand how each factor within the system, however, contributes to an effect requires understanding that factor's influence on the rest of the system. Isolating these factors and describing their causal powers is necessary to fit together the description of the larger system. And the last section argued that requesting an explanation of the influence of a factor takes the form of a contrastive why-question.

More importantly, separating causal from constitutive statements is problematic because causal accounts can (and often should) focus on a broader class of events than Wendt emphasizes. Underlying the notion that cause and effect are separate is that causes and effects are two discrete events with no intrinsic connection to one another. When approaching social phenomena, Wendt (1998: 113) takes this to mean that a promise and a language of promising are the same event because a promise has an intrinsic connection to a language of promising.[15]

A broader definition of event treats elements of constitutive relationships as different events (e.g. a specific promise as a different event from a language of promising). Recall that I defined an event as an instance of an action, condition, mechanism, and object in a state of affairs. Saying 'I promise' (a specific action) is independent of a language of promising (a condition) in two ways. On the one hand, a language of promising can exist whether or not I make a specific promise. On the other hand, I can say 'I promise' without being obligated if the language of promising is counterfactually manipulated. The effect (a specific promise as obligation, E_p) and its cause (a language of promising, C_l) are causally connected because if the language of promising counterfactually were changed such that saying 'I promise' had a different meaning (say expressing a desire for social acceptance rather than an obligation, C_l^*), then there would be some change in the effect (to E_p^*). Put otherwise, a constitutive relationship has causal significance because conceptual linkages (the master–slave relationship) are necessary for specific, empirical cases (a particular slave and master). If those conceptual linkages were constructed differently, we would describe a case differently (without using the language of master–slave).

This definition of events makes more sense when handling social phenomena. A broad definition of events allows us to treat structures, reasons, or mental constructions as causes of action even if there is no independent existence in space-time.

The second reason to separate causal questions from constitutive questions is that why-questions look for determinate responses, whereas how-possible questions search for indeterminate answers (Doty, 1993; Weldes, 1996). While some positivist accounts of causation are deterministic, many are not. Probablistic accounts often embrace indeterminism, and necessary-conditions-based accounts do not imply determinism.[16] Similarly, how-possible questions often treat social rules, institutions, norms, and structures as necessary conditions for social actions; to ask if a social action is possible, one asks about the enabling conditions that are part of the causal explanation for the action. The example of Weldes' account of the Cuban missile crisis discussed later highlights these similarities.

The most important reason often advanced to separate how-possible from why-questions is that they require different answers. How-possible questions seem to ask for broad descriptions of social structures and the systems in which they are incorporated, whereas why-questions highlight specific aspects in the effort to make causal statements. Asking, in Wendt's example, 'How was it possible for Stalin, a single individual, to exercise so much power over the Soviet people?' requires looking at the broad systems of power in the Soviet Union, whereas asking 'Why did Stalin obtain power?' might ask for the specific events that led him to succeed Lenin. In short, causal statements are interested in explaining temporal sequences, whereas constitutive statements are interested in static systemic totality.

Separating causal and constitutive relations because of a concern about the referents of inquiry is unnecessary because translating how-possible questions into contrastive why-questions is required to give an adequate response. Any response to a how-possible question — say, gravity as a response to 'How is it possible that the moon orbits the earth?' — occasions a second question: 'Why does gravity make the moon orbit the earth?' The follow-up why-question is essential because there are so many interesting contrasts required for answering the how-possible question: 'Why does gravity cause the moon to orbit rather than crash into the earth?', 'Why does the Earth not orbit the moon?', and 'Why does the moon orbit the Earth instead of another planet?' Each contrast provides an understanding of a different element of the whole and enables an analysis of the relationship between the parts.

Contrastive-why questions also highlight the specific areas of interest for the researcher, making inquiry more precise. Instead of asking 'How can Louis XIV be so powerful?', one might be better served by asking 'Why was Louis XIV more powerful than Louis XIII?' The former question is a bad question because there are too many possible answers: Louis XIV's power was possible because he was alive, because he was a monarch, because he was male, and so on without limit. The latter question is much clearer because it asks for contrasts and isolates elements of interest. Louis XIII and Louis XIV were both alive, male, and monarchs, but Louis XIV had a different relationship to the nobility from Louis XIII, enabling him to exert more power and influence within France. To explain why Louis XIV was more important than the Queen, Maria Theresa, one would highlight a different set of factors related to the rules of succession

and gender. In either case, the use of contrastive why-questions clarifies the elements of interest in an inquiry through demands for causal explanation.

Causal theorizing in the Cuban missile crisis

Jutta Weldes' account of the Cuban missile crisis shows these connections between constitutive and causal theorizing. While Weldes claims to begin with a how-possible question and partly eschews causal explanation, I suggest that she really is beginning with a contrastive why-question and proposes a contrastive, counterfactual response that is clear and persuasive.

When the Kennedy administration discovered Soviet missiles being introduced into Cuba, they found it an 'obvious' threat to US security. Within the administration and in its public statements, the Soviet introduction of missiles was portrayed as swift and secretive, hostile and expansionist. Weldes asks (1996: 291), 'How was this "obvious" understanding of the situation, and the equally "obvious" US national interest, arrived at?'

Weldes argues that the obviousness of the crisis is a puzzle because the Soviet build-up need not have been depicted as expansionist. On the one hand, the Kennedy administration might have believed the build-up to be a defensive reaction to US actions in Cuba, such as the Bay of Pigs or Operation Mongoose. Had the Kennedy administration adopted this narrative of the crisis, the national interest would have been defined differently; the administration would have realized that 'the US had neither the right nor any reason to seek the removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba' (Weldes, 1996: 293). Alternatively, the Kennedy administration might have believed the introduction of Soviet nuclear missiles into Cuba could stabilize the nuclear balance. By 1962, the United States realized that the Soviets held fewer nuclear weapons. McNamara, for example, suggested that the introduction of Soviet missiles posed no threat to deterrence because the introduction of missiles did not provide the Soviets with a significant strategic advantage; Weldes (1996: 294–295) suggests that it might have even stabilized the Cold War by providing the Soviets with a credible nuclear deterrent.

Weldes' puzzle is a model request for a causal explanation. Translating Weldes' concerns into a contrastive why-question, one might ask, 'Why did the Kennedy administration believe it had an obvious interest in removing Soviet nuclear weapons from Cuba rather than believe the missiles were defensive or even stabilizing?' Better than many authors, Weldes not only describes the factual effect of interest (US interest in removing missiles), but she is also extraordinarily clear about the contrastive effects (non-interest or acceptance).

Weldes (1996: 295–302) furnishes a contrastive, causal response. US representation of the Soviet Union linked Soviet conduct to the conduct of Nazi Germany, emphasizing the links between totalitarianism, duplicity, and expansionism. This representation explains why Soviet conduct was always considered treacherous and offensive and why the United States, in describing its own conduct, emphasized its open nature. Furthermore, the United States styled itself as the leader of the Western free world. This 'world leader' image legitimated a US response to the missiles to protect others from aggression and it marginalized defensive narratives by representing the United States as the defender. Weldes' contrastive, counterfactual claim is that the 'obvious' interest in removing

missiles from Cuba was caused by US representations of itself. If contrastive causes had occurred — if the United States had not linked expansion to its representation of the Soviet Union, or if the United States did not describe itself as a world leader with legitimate interests in the western hemisphere — then a contrastive effect would have occurred. The US representation of its interests in Cuba would have been different.[17]

Weldes' treatment of constitutive relations is not only a prime example of making contrastive, counterfactual causal claims. More importantly, it is clear and persuasive because she makes causal arguments with clear contrasts. Claiming that statements about constitutive relations and statements about causal relations are usually the same does not mean that all elements of varied post-positivist research programs can be reduced to positivist programs. There are significant disagreements in other areas of the philosophy of science, methods, and substance that are not overcome by emphasizing contrasts. Focusing on a contrastive causal account, however, highlights those differences that are already thorny, tough problems, preventing them from becoming entangled in causal talk.

Conclusion

In his review of the philosophy of science debates in IR, Patrick Jackson (2011) argues that when the term 'science' is used, it is in the attempt to discredit rival methodological approaches. Several authors, noting the politicization of scientific arguments, recommend avoiding philosophical debates about science, causation, and related issues. Nuno Monteiro and Kevin Ruby (2009: 44), for example, suggest that 'great debates should be about substantive questions, not about inevitably shaky meta-theoretical positions.' In place of discussions of science, causality, and related concepts, Monteiro and Ruby emphasize a prudent approach that ensures scholars are consistent with their own tradition, rather than adjudicating between positions.

While these concerns are well placed, the conclusion is wrong. Pluralists presume that IR scholars do not share foundational intuitions about what causes are in political research; therefore, they are skeptical about the prospects for advancing a common account. By contrast, I argue that the sources of division are not related to causation. Methods debates have bled into our intuitions about causation, infecting a field that agrees on important questions with needless divisions. At a minimum, it is worth exploring how far we can develop a common intuition using practical research puzzles and their attendant demands for explanations as starting points. A focus on research questions as requests for causal explanations provides grounds for a reconstruction of our intuitions about causation.

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Notes

1 These positions are discussed at length later in the article.
2 See, for example, the contributions to Beebee et al. (2010). A second step is often to marginalize recalcitrant cases through a variety of strategies (Collins et al., 2004: 32–38).

3 In contrast, a second approach judges accounts of causation by their usefulness rather than their intuitiveness (Collins et al., 2004: 30–31).
4 On the relationships between forms of questions and forms of causal inference, see Suganami (1996).
5 This last example is from Lebow and Stein (1996).
6 These examples are from Allison and Zelikow (1999).
7 Contrastive why-questions were originally proposed by van Fraassen (1980).
8 A similar discussion, highlighting research puzzles, is in Grofman (2001).
9 Hall (2004).
10 I use the term 'strict' rather than 'necessary condition counterfactual' because necessary conditions can also be explored using contrastive counterfactuals (see Goertz and Levy, 2007).
11 IR scholars often suggest that causal language in the philosophy of science is tied to connections between events (e.g. Chernoff, 2007: 125; Wendt, 1998). But the meaning of events is never specified. In philosophy, the meaning of events is the subject of much controversy. (see, Higginbotham et al., 2000). A strong definition of the independence of events posits that they must occupy different places in space-time. However, we often talk about causality when cause and effect occupy the same space-time position. Heat, for example, causes iron to glow, although both glowing and heated are properties of the piece of iron (Gasking, 1955: 479). Similarly, for mental phenomena to be treated as having causal significance (a belief or reason is a cause of a decision), we must relax the physical separation of cause and effect. A weak condition for independence, posited here, is that events are independent if they are logically separable (they do not logically entail the same predicates) and are capable of being treated as explanans and explanandums.
12 There may be some concern that this definition of event contains underlying ontological assumptions. Events, however, are here treated as component parts of causal statements and do not necessarily refer to isolated objects that exist in the world.
13 Many alternative accounts have sought to bridge the divide between these approaches, and it is beyond the scope of this article to situate this account of causation in these debates (see Hollis and Smith, 1990; Kurki, 2008; Little, 1991; Mahoney, 2008; Wendt, 1999).
14 Others describe how-possible as hypothetical. Asking 'How is it possible for a plane to crash?', for example, provides a list of hypotheses to organize inquiry when trying explain why a particular plane crashed (see Salmon, 2006).
15 His example is selling a slave and the institution of slavery.
16 Necessary conditions accounts are still deterministic in the sense that if the cause does not exist, the effect does not exist; however, permutations of necessary conditions accounts, often called INUS accounts, have avoided this form of causal determinism (see Mackie 1974).
17 This account of the role of causation in interpretivist research is similar to Wight's (2006: 272–279) analysis of motivation.

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