

The Role of Causation in History

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E.J. Tapp's bold claim that without a 'concept of causation there can be no history' has serious implications for practical and philosophical aspects of history.¹ Indeed, few historians would argue that causation plays no role in the study of the past. It is a key component of historical methodology and a crucial device in attempting to explain why events happened as they did. Whilst the concept of causation has always been present in the study and construction of history, it was not until 1734 with the Baron de Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur and Decadence of the Romans* that an emphasis was placed on trying to explaining *why* an event – in this case, the rise and decline of Rome – had occurred. Since then, historians have grappled with the concept and employed it in varying ways and to varying degrees in their work. The application of causal explanations has, however, raised several important issues which the historian must consider. As Paul Conklin asserts, the debates about causation in history rarely focus on its importance in adequate historical explanation, but rather on the implications of its use.² This invariably leads to the consideration of several important issues. One of the most obvious is the definition and identification of a 'cause' and the factors which make an event or condition one. This in turn highlights the difficulties of selecting from what is often a plurality of causes which may affect any single event in the past. Causation also evokes considerations of which causes, if any, may be deemed more important than others. The subjective selection by the historian from these myriad events and conditions represents a significant aspect of the debate regarding the role of causation in history. Finally, there are debates surrounding the role that determinism, free will and chance play in causal explanations of historical events – whether there are grand theories guiding the course of history or whether human free agency ultimately decides the outcome of past events. Whilst these aspects of causation remain fiercely debated, less contentious is the notion that causation plays an important role in providing a coherent, intelligible explanation of the past.

Causal relationships are essential to establishing historical explanations and aiding in the understanding of the past – without it, historians are left with a collection of unrelated facts. In a

1 E. J. Tapp, 'Some Aspects of Causation in History,' *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 49, No. 3, (1952), 68.

2 Paul K. Conklin, 'Causation Revisited,' *History and Theory*, Vol.13, No. 1, (1974), 1.

similarly bold fashion Tapp asserts that causation should be the foremost concern of all historians; 'the great central pillar' of historical thinking.³ E.H. Carr is another to argue the importance of causation in history, stating that history is first and foremost a 'study of causes'.⁴ More so, Carr believes that the true historian's role is, having assessed the causes of an event, to form them into a hierarchy of importance. In establishing a plurality of causes, and then forming them into a hierarchy of importance, the issue of subjectivity, selection and value judgements becomes pertinent as they reflect the historian's own unique interpretation of the past, as identified by Mendel Cohen in his analysis of selection in causation.⁵ To assess all that has been said about causation and history would overstep the bounds of this essay, but it is clear from this brief survey of opinions that whilst causation is acknowledged as a fundamental aspect in the study of history, there is little consensus on the precise role it should play. Perhaps as Stephen Rigby, Frederick Teggart and Anton Froeyman all recognise, the reason for such contention is that there no consensus on the identification of a 'cause', nor do all historians understand the philosophy of causation.⁶ Bearing the significant issues of the debate in mind, I will suggest a common sense approach to historical causation; assessing causal relationships within history, balancing the major concerns of plurality, hierarchy, selection, determinism, free will and chance in history as expressed by historians.

As Tapp has argued causation has, and should, continue to play an important role in the work of historians and historiographers.⁷ The historian's role is to give an account of what, how and why events in the past occurred as they did.⁸ Causation may therefore be seen as a branch of historical explanation used to answer these basic questions.⁹ Until well into the twentieth century historians told a narrative of the past using the available facts and evidence to answer the 'what' question.¹⁰ This approach is not specifically concerned with causal relationships. The act of merely describing history has been criticised by Carr who claims that one may describe history but explain nothing, indicating a failure on the part of the historian in fulfilling their role.¹¹ It is the predominant view now that historians should not be content to write 'mere annals', but must 'give something more than a record of events, [they] must discover the connection between one event and the other'.¹² This is the essence of causation, and key to a greater understanding of the past. When approaching the questions of 'how' and 'why', the application of causation becomes critical. History is, after all, an account of men and women attempting to 'do things', so it is common to investigate why and how these events came to be.¹³ The 'how' question begs a causal response, although this is generally

3 Tapp, 'Some Aspects of Causation,' 67.

4 E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, 2nd Edition, (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), 81.

5 Mendel F. Cohen, 'Causation in History,' *Philosophy*, Vol. 62, No. 241, (1987), 341-360.

6 Anton Froeyman, 'Concepts of Causation in Historiography,' *Historical Methods*, Vol. 42, No. 3, (2009), 116-128. Stephen H. Rigby, 'Historical Causation: Is One Thing More Important Than Another?', *History*, Vol. 80, No. 259, (1995), 227-242. Frederick J. Teggart, 'Causation in Historical Events,' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (1942), 3-11.

7 Tapp, 'Some Aspects of Causation,' 68.

8 Froeyman, 'Concepts of causation,' 119. Michael Stanford, 'Causation,' *New Perspective*, Vol. 7, No. 1, (2001). Accessed 3 May 2012, http://www.history-ontheweb.co.uk/concepts/concept71_causation.htm.

9 Ronald F. Atkinson, *Knowledge and Explanation: An Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, (London: MacMillan Press, 1978), 95.

10 Cohen, 'Causation in History,' 350.

11 Carr, *What is History?*, 81. Cohen, 'Causation in History,' 350.

12 Teggart, 'Causation in Historical Events,' 3.

13 Stanford, 'Causation'.

achieved through a historical narrative. The historical narrative has often been mistaken for a purely descriptive account of past events. However, upon closer analysis Froeyman identified that historical narratives share four traits which establish a coherent, causal chain of explanation.¹⁴ The stages of the narrative form a causal chain, linking them together and making them intelligible, with all stages relating back to a central concept or subject and a 'plot' which gives the narrative its distinct structure.¹⁵ 'Why' questions also ask for a causal answer, most easily summed up as 'because' – although few historians would argue that it was so simply explained. From a myriad of factors historians seek the relevant information to explain why the past occurred as it did. Employing a causal approach is essential in helping to better explain and understand the past. It helps to make events in the past coherent and intelligible. Causation, the relationships between events and the forces exerted on individuals, groups and ideas is therefore a 'central pillar' of historical explanation.¹⁶ However, as Michael Stanford acknowledges, whilst causes are necessary to historical explanation, their apparent simplicity gives way to a complex and 'almost impossible' path for the historian.¹⁷ This then presents the historian with an unenviable but crucial task.

The concept of causation has always been prevalent, if not always the focus, in the construction and interpretation of the past.¹⁸ The historian's goal of explaining the past has meant that even in merely describing events, causation is implicitly part of their work. In providing a sequence of events, causal relationships are implied as one event or force acts upon and leads to another. Whilst ancient historians predominantly produced narrative explanations, they often incorporated causal relationships to explain past events. Herodotus, Thucydides and Polybius all sought to explain the past through narrative; yet causal relationships were implicit in the selection and ordering of events, people and ideas. The narrative structure gave coherence and order to events, demonstrating their interconnectedness. However, ancient Greek and Roman historians also strongly believed in fate and the will of the Gods. The outcome of events was never truly determined by cause and effect relationships, but rather by 'divine will'. This limited their attempts to explain the past through specific, identifiable cause and effect relationships.¹⁹

Historical explanations during the Middle Ages were also primarily reliant on the concept of 'divine will'. Christian scholars rejected the notions of astrological determinism which had gained prominence prior to the medieval period, instead believing that the actions of men and women were in some way representative of the meanings of the Christian faith or the plans of God.²⁰ Many events, whether they were contemporary or historical, were attributed to divine will. Augustine's *City of God*, considered to be one of the most important early historical works, differed slightly from this viewpoint.²¹ Augustine saw history as a struggle between the 'city of man' and the 'city of god' – those who pursued earthly pleasures and those who served God. He attributed the fall of Rome in 410 to the moral decay of Roman society, rather than the will of God which so many had

14 Froeyman, 'Concepts of Causation,' 120.

15 *Ibid.*, 120-121.

16 Tapp, 'Some Aspects of Causation,' 67.

17 Stanford, 'Causation'.

18 Tapp, 'Some Aspects of Causation,' 68.

19 Ralph B. Smith, 'Historical Explanation: From Narrative to Causation – and Back?'. *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 37, No. 3, (2011), 383.

20 *Ibid.*, 385.

21 Dana Gould & Terry L. Mieth, *Augustine's City of God*, (Nashville: Holman Reference, 1999), 16-25.

believed beforehand. Nevertheless, the concept of 'divine will' remained the predominant means of explanation for a long period of history.

It was not until the eighteenth century with the Baron de Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur and Decadence of the Romans* that a discernible emphasis was placed on causal factors in history.²² Montesquieu laid the foundations for modern causal history, highlighting the important relationships between conditions, events and their eventual outcomes which make for the study of history.²³ Montesquieu believed that:

It is not fortune that rules the world ... There are general causes, whether moral or physical which act upon every monarchy; which advance, maintain or ruin it. All accidents are subject to these causes. If the chance loss of a battle – that is, a particular cause – ruins a state, there is a general cause which created the situation whereby this state could perish with the loss of a single battle.²⁴

Montesquieu not only sought to explain the reasons for the expansion and decline of the Roman Empire, but also potential 'general causes' which may have been attributable to other instances in history. Montesquieu's lead was followed in other great works of the era, like Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Later in the eighteenth century, ideas of total, progressive causal histories began to emerge. Hegel melded history and philosophy together, viewing all of history as stages and processes of human reason; the ultimate goal of which was the combination of the individual's intellectual freedom with the moral needs of society, embodied in the modern European nation-state. All of history, from an individual's decisions to ideas, movements and events were seen as part of this process. Marx also proposed a view of history based on 'historical materialism'. Human progress was best characterised by distinct stages of modes of production and domination of the ruling class over the means of production and exchange. The conflict between classes generated by these factors would trigger progress. All of history could be traced to the underlying structures of production and exchange. Engels claimed that Marx had discovered the 'laws of history'.²⁵ The Historicist view of history has traditionally been opposed by empiricists because of its determinist nature and the minimised notion of 'free will'.

During the eighteenth century philosopher David Hume questioned the prevailing views of causal relationships, which would have a significant impact on the philosophy of causation in history.²⁶ He argued that a cause and effect relationship could not be proven; merely the relationship between two objects or events observed. Even if event A was always followed by event B, it could only be said that it is *likely* to occur.²⁷ Hume believed that human mind formed the causal link between the two events. Hume was sceptical of the ability to define a law which identified a causal link between two events, but even Hume was reluctant to fully reject the notion of causation.²⁸ Following from this, scientific and law-legal approaches to historical causation have also been put forth. The aim of these approaches was much like Montesquieu's – to observe patterns and models which could lead

22 Smith, 'Historical Explanation,' 384-385.

23 Carr, *What is History*, 81.

24 Baron de Montesquieu cited in Smith, 'Historical Explanation,' 384.

25 *Ibid.*, 388-389.

26 *Ibid.*, 390.

27 Stanford, 'Causation'. Tapp, 'Some Aspects of Causation,' 68.

28 Morris R. Cohen, 'Causation and its Applications in History,' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (1942), 15.

to the development of historical laws and the prediction of events based on causal relationships and conditions. Popper argued that the physical nature of historical events meant that they were, by their very nature, repeatable. However, the human aspect of the past, the psychological and motivational aspects of decision making, means that the only way an historical event could be recreated is by re-imagining the past.²⁹ The idea of covering laws was also proposed by Carl Hempel, but empiricists rejected his claim, stating it would result in generalisations too broad to work with or too specific to an individual case. These 'scientific' approaches to causal explanation have since fallen out of favour.

A more recent trend in causal history is the counterfactual, although this approach remains controversial within the discipline. The counterfactual approach has been demonstrated notably in the works of Niall Ferguson and Robert Crowley.³⁰ Ferguson strongly advocates counterfactual history as a means of disputing 'great forces' histories and emphasising the power of individual choices and chance events in history. Counterfactuals are usually proposed as 'what if' scenarios – effectively a thought experiment for historians.³¹ If a cause may be described as 'an event, action or omission but for which the whole subsequent course of events would have been significantly different', counterfactuals can substitute or change causes associated with significant points in history and hypothesise alternate outcomes.³² The actual course of past events can be better appreciated if alternative realities are considered.³³ Counterfactuals can also be used to test the validity of causal attribution; if condition *C* is necessary for event *E*, counterfactuals can be used to ascertain whether *E* could happen without *C*.³⁴ However, this approach is highly theoretical as historians have no way of knowing what never existed, and is therefore of limited use. Froeyman instead suggests the use of comparisons, as finding similar events and conditions is possible and can give weight to causal attribution.³⁵

Causation has also been faced with the post-modern challenge to historiography. Hayden White and Keith Jenkins have criticised the subjective nature of causal selection and interpretation. Both have argued that causal explanations are not concerned with the past, but rather are battles between historians for the primacy of position and interpretation.³⁶ More radical post-modern scholars have rejected causation on the basis that sequential time is an intellectual construct, but this is an extreme form of argument that has found little support amongst historians.³⁷ The concept of time is a fundamental part of historical studies as it defines the territory into which historians inquire – that is, the past. These events, having happened, must be located somewhere in the timeline. Whilst the nature of how these events are organised and ordered may be debated, it is unreasonable to expect history to be written without a functioning concept of sequential time.

²⁹ Smith, 'Historical Explanation,' 391.

³⁰ Robert Crowley, *What If?: Military Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*, ed. R. Crowley, (London: Pan Books, 2001). Niall Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

³¹ Cohen, 'Causation and its Applications,' 20. Froeyman, 'Concepts of Causation,' 117.

³² William H. Walsh cited in Stanford, 'Causation'.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Froeyman, 'Concepts of Causation,' 116. Daniel Little, 'Philosophy of History,' *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. N. Zalta, (2011). Accessed 3 May 2012, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/history/>.

³⁵ Froeyman, 'Concepts of Causation,' 123. Teggart, 'Causation in Historical Events,' 7.

³⁶ Hayden White cited in Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, (London: Granta Publications, 2000), 140. Keith Jenkins cited in Evans, *In Defence of History*, 140.

³⁷ Evans, *In Defence of History*, 141.

Despite the fact that some historians have rejected the role of causation in historical explanation, the majority have accepted that it has an important role to play. However, there is no all-encompassing theoretical framework agreed upon by historians as to the precise role that it does or should fulfil when trying to understand the past.

The sheer number and variety of issues that emerge from debates about the role of causation highlight its importance. One of the foremost concerns is the identification of a 'cause', a problem emphasised by Ronald Atkinson and Allen Nevins.³⁸ Causation extends beyond a case of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. Simply because one event follows after another it does not mean that the former was the cause of the latter. There are usually multiple factors at work to bring about an event. Tapp claimed that only by appreciating 'close antecedent factors which are relevant to the event' can a proper understanding of the past be achieved.³⁹ To do this, he supported the practice of identifying necessary and sufficient conditions. Necessary conditions are conditions without which an event *could not* happen. These may be broken down further into absolute conditions, without which the event *definitely* could not happen, and relative conditions, without which the event *probably* would not happen.⁴⁰ Sufficient conditions are conditions that, when present, may reasonably be assumed to be a factor in an event. However, these conditions may be relative to prevailing background conditions contemporaneous with the event in question. This approach to causation is not supported by all historians. Conklin believes that the search for sufficient conditions has confused the debate about causation in history.⁴¹ Whilst necessary and sufficient conditions may prove to be the best indicators of causal links and may give way to discovering patterns in history, they are also very hard to identify. The accumulation of necessary antecedent causes can also give the impression of inevitability and determinism. There are numerous other ways historians may identify causes. Louis Gottschalk recognises that historians may seek to identify long and short term causes for events.⁴² However, the identification of 'long' and 'short' term causes is dependent on the time period being analysed by the historian. One may be able to identify long term causes stretching back thousands of years as Fernand Braudel did in *The Mediterranean*. However, Froeyman is critical of the ability to apply causal mechanisms and determining relevant conditions on such a scale, where factors like geography, weather patterns and demographic change may all be accounted for as potential causal elements in a historical event. Stanford advocates that true causes must be sought in human action and decision, and the motivations for making them.⁴³ To truly understand why an event happened historians must seek out the participants' intentions and examine the conditions under which they acted. This is similar to Robin Collingwood's argument that a 'cause' refers to what brings about free human action, and that to understand the past we must see events from the inside.⁴⁴ Hayden White, Herbert Hart and Tony Honore have proposed that the true cause is the factor that is 'abnormal'.⁴⁵ It is the factor that, if not present, would have allowed the regular course of events to unfold. However, as White acknowledges, the interpretation

³⁸ Atkinson, *Knowledge and Explanation*, 183. Allen Nevins cited in Cohen, 'Causation in History,' 341.

³⁹ Tapp, 'Some Aspects of Causation,' 67.

⁴⁰ Atkinson, *Knowledge and Understanding*, 104. Evans, *In Defence of History*, 157. Tapp, 'Some Aspects of Causation,' 67.

⁴¹ Conklin, 'Causation Revisited,' 4.

⁴² Louis R. Gottschalk, *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 209.

⁴³ Stanford, 'Causation'.

⁴⁴ Robin G. Collingwood cited in Atkinson, *Knowledge and Understanding*, 148. Collingwood cited in Stanford, 'Causation'. Collingwood cited in Tapp, 'Some Aspects of Causation,' 69.

⁴⁵ Herbert L.A. Hart and Tony Honore cited in M.F. Cohen, 'Causation in History,' 356. Hayden White cited in Atkinson, *Knowledge and Understanding*, 160.

of the 'abnormal' cause will be dependent on the historian's point of view, values and the questions they are asking. The different approaches to identifying causes may be the most damning charge against causation in history, but it cannot be denied that events do not occur spontaneously. There are a series of conditions and triggers which precipitate them. The variety of methods which attempt to define or identify a cause suggests that it is extremely difficult to single out just one factor which may be attributed as the cause to any one historical event. This has led to the general acceptance that there is a plurality of causes to any one event.

Few historians outside of the Historicist schools would claim that there is a single causal explanation for any event. In their investigations historians are faced with a multitude of facts, conditions, events, actors and ideas that may contribute to the explanation of the questions they are seeking to answer. However, even in accepting a plurality of causes, historians may disagree over the selection and the significance of each cause. The selection of causes and the subjective judgements historians make in determining them is therefore a critical aspect of the causation debate. Carr's conception of the true historian was one who, just as they gather facts and discard the irrelevant, does the same with contributing causal factors. It is then up to the historian to marshal these causes in order of their importance. To Carr, the organisation of causes is the pinnacle of historical investigation: the 'essence of [their] interpretation'.⁴⁶ In fact, it seems a common-sense approach for the historian. The historian can only account for so much and must select only what they deem is relevant. Some historians may use a rational approach to this selection, whilst others may allow emotion or value judgements to influence their decisions and interpretations. More often than not, a historian's selection will be influenced by both factors, leading to unique and independent interpretations of causal relationships. However, this notion of subjective selection has been challenged by some post-modernist scholars like Jenkins. He argues that even if causes could be identified, all events must be accounted for as being related in an ever-expanding causal chain, but this runs contrary to a common sense approach.⁴⁷ The interpretation of historical facts and causes is a process of selection in terms of historical significance, influenced by the perspectives of the historian.⁴⁸ White believes that the importance placed on a cause is not intrinsic, but rather determined by a historian's point of view. As mentioned earlier, this may affect the historian's selection of 'abnormal' causes.⁴⁹ However, White also warns against making subjective selections based on 'value properties' of causes; that is, a cause perceived to be good, bad, right or wrong.⁵⁰ Hart and Honore also reject the notion of seeking a hierarchy of causes because it is subjective, arbitrary and based on value judgements. Conversely, Mendel Cohen believes that causal interpretation needs some form of value judgement, and to avoid such a practice would drastically alter the discipline.⁵¹ Different perspectives lead to the growth of knowledge and varying interpretations of the past. In acknowledging a multiplicity of causes at work, and then making a selection based on perceived importance, the historian highlights their aims and contributes to an ever-expanding base of knowledge and research as to 'why' events happened as

46 Carr, *What is History?*, 82-84, 97.

47 Jenkins cited in Rigby, 'Historical Causation,' 239-240.

48 Carr, *What is History?*, 99. Rigby, 'Historical Causation,' 232-235.

49 Hayden White in Atkinson, *Knowledge and Understanding*, 159-160.

50 Hayden White in Atkinson, *Knowledge and Understanding*, 163.

51 Cohen, 'Causation in History,' 358.

they did. Far from damaging the discipline, the openness, reassessment and possibilities of causal interpretation must be seen as positive contributions to the study of history.⁵²

Causation's prominent role in history has also given rise to debates over the nature of free will, determinism and chance events in history. The application of causation to history has been resisted by some on the grounds that it negates the idea of free will and instead posits a determinist perception of the past. One of the most criticised approaches is the 'great cause', which aims to provide an all-encompassing explanation to past events.⁵³ These 'great cause' explanations form part of the historicist school of thought and include theories such as 'divine will', Hegelian idealism and Marxian economic theory. These movements may imprecisely give the impression of inevitability, with all events and individuals guided by certain external forces throughout history and into the future. The application of laws to history has also been seen as advancing a determinist view of the past. These approaches were popular during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but have since been passed over by most contemporary historians. However, there is no reason to assume that causation implies determinism, or that notions of free will and determinism are mutually exclusive. It is possible to break the determinist view into two parts, opening a new avenue for consideration.⁵⁴ Firstly, there is absolute determinism, whereby events have only one way in which they could have occurred, with relationships and causes fixed. Alternatively, there is limited determinism, in which there is an end result, but the way in which it is reached may come about in different ways. This may be demonstrated in the idea that World War II could still have occurred even without Adolf Hitler in power in Germany.⁵⁵ Richard Evans suggests that the political, social and economic conditions within Germany such as the humiliation imposed by the Versailles Treaty and the attitudes of leading members of the German military may have been sufficient causes to spark a war.⁵⁶ However, the actual events and conditions which may have led to the outbreak of war, and the course of the war itself, may have been greatly different.

The rationalist approach to historical causation is one dictated by the necessity of conditions, where people are still free to choose a course of action, but from choices imposed on them by the conditions they find themselves in. This recalls Marx's comment that; 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past'.⁵⁷ It is therefore impossible to believe that 'free will' is indeterminate or impervious to external forces. Decisions and actions are informed by experience and knowledge of causal consequences, as well as external pressures.⁵⁸ Francis Bradley, like Tapp, believes that free will is not completely unrestricted. He writes that 'if the freedom of the will is to mean that the actions of the men are subject to no law, and in this sense are irrational, then the possibility of history, I think, must be allowed to disappear', as the past becomes a matter of uncertainty.⁵⁹ The application of causal explanation does not reject the notion of individual moral responsibility or decision making, although

52 Atkinson, *Knowledge and Understanding*, 162.

53 Atkinson, *Knowledge and Understanding*, 167. Neil Munro, 'Causation in History,' *Pathways School of Philosophy*. Accessed 3 May 2012, <http://www.philosophypathways.com/essays/munro2.html>.

54 M.R. Cohen, 'Causation and its Applications,' 23.

55 Evans, *In Defence of History*, 132.

56 *Ibid.*, 132.

57 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852. Accessed 5 May 2012, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>.

58 Tapp, 'Some Aspects of Causation,' 76-78.

59 Francis H. Bradley cited in Tapp, 'Some Aspects of Causation,' 77.

the recognition of external factors working on human agency is a fundamental part of causal explanation.⁶⁰ People are constantly under pressures outside of their control, be they political, social, cultural, economic or psychological. As Stanford suggests the human aspect of causation is of the utmost importance, and the analysis of these pressures is vital in offering a comprehensive causal explanation.⁶¹

In addition to causes, one must also consider the role of chance or accident events in history. Chance in history is often referred to as the 'Cleopatra's Nose' theory, where it is said that small chance events have the power to drastically alter outcomes.⁶² Whilst Carr acknowledges that chance events have real outcomes, he dismisses their study or inclusion in a causal hierarchy as they can add no knowledge or meaning. In insisting that historians should seek generalisations, accidents serve little purpose in analysis.⁶³ Whilst Carr claims that offering accidents as part of causal explanations challenges any attempt at explaining history in a coherent, logical sequence, it is unreasonable to assume that accidental events have no place in a complete and adequate understanding of the past. Whilst they may not indicate patterns, 'accidents' have often played a very important role in determining the course of past events. If present, they must be considered when attempting to provide an adequate and complete explanation as they help to explicate just *why* events unfolded as they did. Instead of offering them as an explanation in themselves, accidents may lead the way to further causal investigations. Some may seek to explain accidents in terms of a causal chain, and then describe the intersection of two causal chains.⁶⁴ There may also be underlying reasons why an accident may have far reaching consequences in history. Montesquieu proposed that the loss of a battle is not sufficient to bring about the collapse of the state unless there are other causes at work.⁶⁵ Therefore, rather than being offered as a simple 'because', accidents in history open up other avenues for causal explanation. In doing so, the event can be placed in a logical and coherent context relative to the events to which it is associated.

It is therefore apparent from the many and varied attitudes towards causation that it plays an integral role in historical explanation, though it raises many complex issues for the historian to consider when interpreting the past. In fact, there are few who would reject the notion that some form of causal explanation plays an important role in understanding the past – and those who do reject this idea reject the concept of causation almost completely. Despite this general consensus that causation does have a significant role to play in historical explanations, there is no single agreed upon approach to its use or implementation, making it one of the most contentious aspects of historical methodology. Causation is a crucial component in providing a more complete and coherent explanation of the past. Without causation, the historian is left with a collection of facts, ordered sequentially but unrelated. To truly understand a past event it is important to understand the factors and forces which link events and issues to one another, and from this it is possible to understand more clearly why events occurred as they did. Whilst the selection and identification of causes is one of the most controversial aspects of the causation debate, the variety of approaches indicates how great an emphasis has been placed on this facet of historical explanation. The selection of causes is also greatly influenced by the historian's interpretation

⁶⁰ Evans, *In Defence of History*, 130.

⁶¹ Stanford, 'Causation'.

⁶² Carr, *What is History?*, 85.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶⁴ J.H. Bury cited in Carr, *What is History?*, 93.

⁶⁵ Montesquieu cited in Smith, 'Historical explanation,' 384.

of the available evidence, their values, beliefs and perspectives. This therefore links causation to interpretation – another key feature of historical methodology. Furthermore, causation raises questions of determinism, free will and chance in history and their respective impacts on shaping the outcomes of past events. Whilst determinist theories have fallen out of favour, causation's greatest contribution is in highlighting the influence external factors can have on human agency, helping the historian to understand why people acted as they did. By assessing the issues of subjectivity, selection, determinism, free will and the identification of causes that it raises, it is possible to develop a balanced and practicable common-sense approach to applying causation to historical explanations. This process also helps to dispel the poor understanding of the philosophy of causation in history identified by Rigby, Teggart and Froeyman. In tackling these issues and the major debates surrounding different approaches it is clear that whilst there is no 'correct' approach to causal history, there are approaches which appeal to balanced historical inquiry. These should be of the greatest benefit to historians in their work. Causation should be fundamental to all well-informed explanations of the past. It helps to offer answers to the question many historians ask – why did events happen as they did? The explanation of the past is inadequate without it. Causation links events and issues to one another, giving coherence and meaning to the past. Whilst there are many other important factors to bear in mind when considering history, Tapp's claim that 'without a concept of causation there can be no history' should certainly be in the forefront of the historian's mind. Without an adequate grasp of causation, history merely becomes a collection of facts and events. It is key to historical methodology and to all historical explanations. A theory of causation is not, in the end, something historians can dispense with.