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Counterfactual Availability and Causal Judgment

Although there are problems with efforts to analyze causation in terms of counterfactuals, mainly stemming from preemption, it is clear that causation and counterfactuals are closely related. In particular, a counterfactual test is a very good prima facie test for causation. While philosophers have primarily been interested in questions concerning the semantics of counterfactuals – which counterfactuals are true, and what are the logical relations among counterfactuals and other claims – psychologists have been interested in the question of which counterfactual possibilities we actually entertain. This is similar to the competence/performance distinction familiar from linguistics. Psychologists have enumerated a number of factors that render certain counterfactual possibilities readily ‘available’. I will explore the various ways in which differences in the availability of different counterfactual possibilities may affect our causal judgments.