Has Thomson's Assumption been Refuted?

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In his recent article, 'Thomson on events and the causal criterion' (Philosophical Studies 39 (1981), pp.319–321), Karl Pfeifer discusses a certain principle of causal relation and tries to reject it. The principle, which Judith Thomson accepts in her book Acts and Other Events, is the following: C causes y if and only if C causes all of y's parts. (In fact Pfeifer discusses the principle, (A), that the only causes an event has are those which cause every one of its parts (p.320). But, as he says, (A) is entailed by Thomson's assumption.)

Pfeifer purports to provide counter-examples to (A), but they seem to me not to have the expected force. Let us consider his examples. His first example is "the example of a post-mortem diagnosis of the causes of the terrible performance of a certain play." He says:

We would surely not wish to exclude the consumption of contaminated food by the actors during intermission merely on the grounds that this did not have any effect on the pre-intermission parts of the performance. (p.320)

Surely, in such a case, people sometimes say:

(1) The consumption of contaminated food caused the terrible performance of the play.

But it is misleading, because the real meaning of (1) is the following:

(2) The consumption of contaminated food caused the terrible performance of the second part of the play, and

(3) The terrible performance of the second part of the play means—but does not cause—the terrible performance of the whole play.

The meaning of 'means' in (3) could be explained as follows. I checkmate your king by moving my queen to king-knight-seven. In this case my moving my queen to king-knight-seven does not cause my checkmating your king. Rather my moving my queen is, because of the existence of the rule of chess, my checkmating your king. Putting the point in Alvin Goldman's terminology, the latter event is conventionally generated by the former.* Similarly, the terrible performance of the whole play is conventionally
generated by the terrible performance of the second part of the play. Of course, in this case, there is no such explicit rule as the rule of chess. But it seems to me that we make use of some vague rule or convention in saying (1).

We should notice that there are two uses of 'cause' here, i.e., 'cause' in (1) and 'cause' in (2). If Thomson uses this verb only in the second sense, then Pfeifer's first example is compatible with the Thomson's assumption, and henceforth with (A).

Pfeifer's second example is "the example of a boxer who, at the end of round 10, has his face in a rather sorry state." He says:

One might inquire as to what made his face look like that and get as answer that it was the hook in round 7, the jab in round 8, and the slash in round 9. Such an answer might be appropriate for a late comer to the fight. Alternatively, one could also get as answer that it was the slash in round 9. Such an answer might be appropriate for someone who missed that particular blow. (p.320)

This example, it seems to me, does not constitute a counter-example to (A), either. In general, when we ask, "What caused E?", we have certain knowledge of the situation where the question is asked. For example, when one asks, "What made his face look like that?", in some case, he may know that the boxer looked handsome before the fight. And if the answerer knows this and knows that the questioner missed the whole fight, then he gives the answer "the hook in round 7, the jab in round 8 and the slash in round 9." In this case, the answer "the slash in round 9" is false or, at least, misleading, because it is the cause of the change X from a fair-face state to an ugly-face state that is asked. But, in some other case, when one asks, "What made his face look like that?", he may know that the boxer's face was already in a sorry state but not so ugly in round 8. If the answerer knows this and knows that the questioner missed only round 9, he gives the answer "the slash in round 9," which is quite appropriate and true. Here we should notice that this answer is, strictly speaking, to the question "What is the cause of the change Y from a less-ugly-but-not-fair-face state to a very-ugly-face state?". And we should notice also that the change Y is not identical with the change X. Therefore it is a mistake to infer that some event Z caused X from the fact that Z caused Y. But it seems to me that Pfeifer makes such a mistake in his second example. If I am right, then the example is compatible with the Thomson's assumption.

In an earlier part of the preceding paragraph, I argued that it is false or, at least, misleading to say that the slash in round 9 is the cause of the change X from a fair-face state to an ugly-face state, when the questioner missed the fight completely and asked "What made his face look like that?". Someone might object "Surely the slash in round 9 is not the cause of X. But it is a cause of X. Hence we can say that the slash caused X. Then the Thomson's assumption must be rejected, since the slash caused only some (proper) part of X". In fact, Pfeifer argues:
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I may get the match to light by rubbing it dry between my palms and then striking it .... The fact that the latter cause is in a sense only partial does not tell against its being a cause. Similarly, it would seem, the fact that the individual punches make their own unique contributions to the mess that is the boxer's face ought not to tell against the last punch's being a cause of that mess. If so, this again indicates that (A) is untenable. (p.321)

To this kind of objection we could reply in the following way. Let U be a partial cause of V. Then we have two cases.

(a) If other causes did not have happened then any part of V would not have happened, and if U did not have happened then any part of V would not have happened.

(b) Even if other causes did not have happened, some part of V would have happened, and even if U did not have happened, some part of V would have happened.

For example, the case of the striking of the match is an instance of the case (a), and the case of the boxer's punch is an instance of the case (b). The main difference between (a) and (b) is that, in the case of (b), the effect of U is conceptually separable from V. Hence, in the case of (b), we can say which part of V U caused. On the other hand, in the case of (a), we cannot say which part of V U caused. For example, we can say that the slash in round 9 caused the change Y from a less-ugly-but-not-fair-face state to a very-ugly-face state, which is a part of the change X from a fair-face state to an ugly-face state. But when we are asked which part of the match's lighting the rubbing-it-dry caused, what can we say? Surely the rubbing caused the match's drying, but the latter event is not any part of the match's lighting.

Pfeifer's argument does not seem to be successful because he neglects this difference between (a) and (b). In fact, we do not hesitate to say that the hook in round 7, the jab in round 8, and the slash in round 9 caused X, but we hesitate to say that the slash in round 9 caused X even if the slash is a (partial) cause of X. And the reason, I think, is that the effect of the slash is conceptually separable from X.

It has been shown, then, that Pfeifer does not succeed in refuting the Thomson's assumption nor (A).

Note