THOMSON ON EVENTS AND THE CAUSAL CRITERION

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In her recent book, *Acts and Other Events*, Judith Thomson purports to provide a counter-example to Davidson's well-known criterion of event identity. This criterion, it will be recalled, states that events are identical if and only if they have exactly the same causes and effects ([1], p. 231).

In making her case, Thomson invites us to consider a complex event, her vacuuming of the carpets, which has as parts the following causal sequence of events: her pressing the button, the electrical circuit's closing, the motor's starting, and the air's starting to be sucked through the hose. We are also asked to consider an event, Alpha, composed of all the parts of the vacuuming with the exception of the circuit's closing. Thomson comments on these two events as follows:

Alpha is discrete from the electrical circuit's closing and hence is not identical with my vacuuming of those carpets. Yet I should imagine that Alpha and my vacuuming of the carpets have exactly the same causes and exactly the same effects. They plainly have the same causes and they have the same effects if it can be supposed that not only does the electrical circuit's closing cause something in Alpha, but so does every part of the circuit's closing cause something in Alpha — if every part causes something in Alpha, then, by (IV), Alpha causes no part of it. The fact that there are — and I think there is no good reason not to allow that there are — events such as Alpha shows [Davidson's criterion] to be false. (p. 70)

Before discussing this case, let me make one comment in explanation. '(IV)' in the quoted passage designates Thomson's principle that $E$ is caused by $y$ if and only if there is an $x$ such that $x$ is part of $y$, and $x$ causes $E$, and no part of $E$ is part of $y$, and no part of $E$ causes part of $y$ (p. 66); the variables are taken to range over events. This principle will not figure in my discussion below.

What Thomson has done is describe two events, the vacuuming and Alpha, which (she claims) have the same causes and effects even though they are non-identical. Clearly if Alpha were not a possible event, Thomson would have no counter-example to Davidson's criterion. This fact might induce those whose sympathies lie with Davidson to regard with suspicion events.
such as Alpha, composed as they are of spatio-temporally scattered parts. I believe, however, that such doubt about the legitimacy of events like Alpha would be misplaced in the present context. So I will try to bear a different direction.

Thomson’s example is a counter-example to Davidson only if a very special assumption (A), which is not made explicit in the quoted passage, is granted. Below I will first argue that (A) is false. Then I will go on to show that when (A) is replaced by a more plausible variant (A*), Thomson’s example is not after all a counter-example to Davidson’s criterion.

To this end, I will focus on the claim that the vacuuming and Alpha have exactly the same causes. Unfortunately, Thomson has not made her reasoning plain here. One possible line of support, though, might be drawn from two quite reasonable suppositions. These are the supposition that whatever causes all the parts of the vacuuming causes all the parts of Alpha (because Alpha is included in the vacuuming) and the supposition that whatever causes all the parts of Alpha could conceivably cause all the parts of the vacuuming. However, these suppositions alone would not be sufficient to force the conclusion that Davidson’s criterion is false. For that we also need as premise the assumption, (A), that the only causes an event has are those which cause every one of its parts.

(A) is indeed available to Thomson as a premise, since it is entailed by her explicit assumption that C causes y if and only if C causes all of y’s parts (p. 63). It is (A) (and hence also the assumption that entails (A)) that I find more suspicious than events like Alpha in this context:

Let us consider some examples that appear to support this suspicion. Take the example of a post-mortem diagnosis of the causes of the terrible performance of a certain play. 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. This fact shows (A) to be untenable.

Consider as well the example of a boxer who, at the end of round 10, has his face in a rather sorry state. 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 latecomer 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. Given the blows suffered in previous rounds,