

Causation as a Core Concept in Conflict Analysis

Daniel Rothbart
Professor of Conflict Analysis and Resolution
ICAR

and

Rose Cherubin
Associate Professor of Philosophy
George Mason University

Conflict Resolution: Core Concepts, Theories, Approaches and Practices, Sean Byrne, Dennis Sandole, Jessica Senehi, and Ingrid Staroste-Sandole, Eds., Routledge Press.

The recent surge in identity-based conflicts has generated an industry of studies on their underlying causes. Yet just below the surface of many studies are crucial philosophical questions about the nature of causation, causal relations among events, and causal mechanisms—questions that are rarely made explicit, and whose importance is easily missed. These questions are addressed in this chapter, and advanced for purposes of conflict analysis. Our perspective is rather unusual for this field—we resort to the rich philosophical tradition on the nature of causation, a tradition that arguably begins with the ancient Greeks and resonates to this day in the work of philosophically-minded social scientists. Revitalizing pivotal themes from this tradition, we develop a conception of causation that is novel for conflict analysis, one that can satisfy the explanatory goals and methodological standards of contemporary researchers in our field. This conception, which centers on what we call formal/teliomorphic causation, finds expression in a *Moralpolitik* of group identities—an axiology of ingroup identity that is fused with the politics of outgroup relations. Thus, for protagonists with a high salience of group identity, memories of past calamities foster a logic of action concerning the “necessary” responses to the enemy’s injustices and vigilance in the face of enormous sacrifice. We illustrate formal/teliomorphic causation through the case of anti-Tutsi propaganda leading up to the Rwandan genocide of 1994.