

Complexity of Causality

Nobody asked but ...

We make this mistake over and over. We think that A causes B. But in addition to A, there are infinite A primes, double primes, triple primes, n -tuple primes, as well as the rest of the alphabet and its primes. And these are not a solid front, but a staggered and scattered barrage.

Furthermore nothing strikes B directly, or practically so.

The Sun's rays are perpendicular only to a single point on the Earth, at a given time, but the beams nevertheless warm everything they strike with a warmth proportional to their relationship with each. But other things, like reflections, are affecting those things simultaneously.

Yes, if someone stays too long in the sun, then the Sun is the major cause of that sunburn. But there were contributors. What made that someone linger too long? They could just as well have sheltered in shadow, or languished in filtered or reflected or refracted light. Or the choice could have been made due to entirely unrelated causes. Could the person have been in engaging conversation with a stranger or a friend? Could the someone have been distracted by a task, or could she have simply fallen asleep?

Even the sunlight is not A begets B.

So, at any instant, there are numbers untold of A, B, C, et al., going in every direction and at every pace conceivable. There are an even greater number of possible collisions, direct or glancing, staccato or languid, sure of only one thing — the certainty of further collision.

The next time someone tells you that A was the true and single cause of B, look upon them with a jaundiced eye.

— Kilgore Forelle