

Lesson 31: Cause and Effect

Introduction

With the acceptance of a multiplicity of existents, the question arises as to whether or not different existents have any relation to each other, and whether or not the existence of some of them depends on the existence of others. If there is such a relation, how many kinds of dependence are there? What are the principles and characteristics of each of them?

However, if someone does not accept the real multiplicity of existents as is the apparent view of some, then there is no room for discussion about existential relations among various existents, and likewise there would be no call for discussion of the various kinds of existence and existents.

In the previous discussion, we indicated that the proof of a special gradation in existence depends upon a principle which must be established in the discussion of cause and effect. Now the time has arrived for us to pay heed to the problems of cause and effect and to establish the mentioned principles. However, before delving into these matters some explanation must be given about the concepts of cause and effect and how the mind becomes acquainted with them.

The Concepts of Cause and Effect

In philosophical terminology, the word 'cause' is used in a general and in a specific sense. The general concept of cause is applied to an existent upon which the realization of another existent depends, even if it is not sufficient for this realization. The specific concept is applied to an existent which is sufficient for the realization of another existent.

In other words, in its general sense, a cause is an existent without which realization of another existent is impossible. In its specific sense, a cause is an existent whose existence requires the realization of another existent.

It is noteworthy that the first sense is more general than the second, because it includes conditions and prerequisites and other incomplete causes, unlike the second sense. The explanation of complete and

incomplete causes, as well as other kinds of causes, will follow. We should take note of the point that a dependent existent (i.e. an effect) is called an effect solely with respect to its aspect of dependence and in relation to the existent upon which it is dependent, not with respect to any other aspect nor in relation to any other existent.

Likewise, something is called a cause in virtue of that very aspect in which another existent depends upon it and in relation to that very existent, not with respect to any aspect or any existent.

For example, heat is an effect with respect to the aspect of its dependence on fire, and in relation to its own cause, not with respect to other aspects. And fire is called a cause with respect to the aspect in which it is a source of heat and in relation to that very heat which it produces, not with respect to another aspect.

Therefore, there is no incompatibility between a certain existent's being a cause in relation to one thing and an effect in relation to something else. And there is even no incompatibility between heat being the effect of a specific fire and being the cause of the occurrence of another fire. Likewise, there is no incompatibility between an existent's having other aspects to be explained in terms of other concepts in addition to the aspects of cause or effect.

For example, in addition to the aspect of causality, fire possesses other aspects, which are referred to by means of the concepts of substance, body, changeable, etc., none of which is the same as its aspect of causality.

The Ways in which the Mind becomes acquainted with these Concepts

With the explanations which has been given of cause and effect it has become clear that these concepts are not whatish concepts or primary intelligibles, and it is not true that in the external world we have an existent whose whatness is being a cause or effect.

Likewise, the above concepts are not secondary logical intelligibles, for they become attributes of entified existents, and in technical terms, their characterization (ittisaf) is external. Hence, these concepts are secondary philosophical intelligibles, and the best proof of this is that in order to abstract these concepts one must compare two existents and take into consideration the aspect of the dependence of one of them on the other.

Until this is done, these concepts will not be abstracted. Thus, if one sees fire thousands of times but does not compare it with the heat it produces, and does not consider the relation between them, he will be unable to relate the concept of cause to fire and the concept of effect to heat.

Now the question arises as to how our minds basically become acquainted with these concepts and

discover such a relation among existents.

Many Western philosophers have imagined that the concepts of cause and effect are obtained by observing the regular simultaneity or succession of two phenomena, that is, when we see that fire and heat always occur together or successively, we abstract the concepts of cause and effect from them, and in truth the content of these two concepts is nothing more than the regular simultaneity or succession of the two phenomena.

However, this speculation is incorrect, because in many cases two phenomena regularly occur together or successively while neither is to be counted as the cause of the other. For example, the light and heat of an electric lamp always appear together, and day and night always occur successively, but neither of them is the cause of the appearance of the other.¹

It may be said that when a phenomenon is subjected to repeated experiments, and it is seen that it does not occur without another existent, in this way the concepts of cause and effect are abstracted from them. However, we know that prior to beginning an experiment, experimenters believe that there is a causal relation among phenomena, and their purpose for performing the experiment is to discover specific causes and effects, and to find out what is the cause of the appearance of some phenomenon.

So, the question arises as to how, prior to performing the experiment, they found out about the concepts of cause and effect. How did they know that such a relation exists among existents, so as to set out to discover a specific relation of cause and effect?

It seems that man discovers this relation for the first time within himself through presentational knowledge. For example, mental actions, decisions, and the acquisition of concepts and mental images are considered to be cases of things one does oneself, and that their existence depends on one's own existence, while one's own existence does not depend on them. By means of such considerations the concepts of cause and effect are abstracted and then generalized to other existents.

Types of Cause

The dependence of one existent upon another, takes various forms. For example, the appearance of a chair, on the one hand, is dependent on the wood of which it is made, while on the other hand, it depends on the carpenter who makes it, on the knowledge and skill of the carpenter, and on his motivation for making it.

Corresponding to these, various kinds of cause may be distinguished. Since the principles of all causes are not the same, it is necessary to mention the types of cause and the terminology appropriate to them before discussing the laws of causality and the principles of cause and effect, so that when we turn to related problems mistakes are not made.

Cause in its general sense, that is, an existent upon which another existent is somehow dependent, may

be classified in various ways, of which the following are the most important:

Complete and Incomplete Causes: A cause may either be such that it is sufficient for the realization of the effect, or such that it is not sufficient for the realization of the effect even though that effect cannot be realized without it. The former sort of cause is called a 'complete cause' and the existence of its effect depends on nothing other than it. In other words, given the existence of the complete cause, the existence of its effect is necessary. The latter sort of cause is called an 'incomplete cause' and one or more things must be added to it before its effect becomes necessary.

Simple and Compound Causes: From another point of view, causes can be divided into the simple and the compound. Simple causes are those such as things which are completely immaterial, such as God the Exalted, and intelligible substances (whose existence must be proven at the appropriate place). Compound causes are those as material causes which have different parts.

Immediate and Mediate Causes: From another point of view, causes can be divided into the immediate and the mediate. For example, the influence of a man on the movement of his own hand may be considered to be immediate, while his influence on the movement of the pen in his hand may be considered through one intermediary, and his influence on his writing as being through two intermediaries, and on the impressions produced in the mind of the reader as through several intermediaries.

Irreplaceable and Replaceable Causes: Sometimes the cause of the appearance of an effect is the existence of a definite existent, and the supposed effect cannot come into existence save by means of that specific cause itself. In this case the above mentioned cause is called an irreplaceable cause.

Sometimes an effect may be brought into existence by one of several interchangeable things, so that the existence of one of them necessitates its appearance, such as heat, which sometimes occurs as a result of the electric current in a wire, sometimes as the result of motion, and sometimes as a result of a chemical reaction, and in this case it is called a replaceable cause.

Internal and External Causes: Sometimes the cause is such that its effect is united with it and remains interior to the existence of the effect, such as the elements which remain interior to the existence of a plant or an animal. This is called an interior cause. Sometimes the cause will be external to the existence of its effect, such as the existence of a craftsman who is external to the existence of his handiwork. This is called an external cause.

Real and Preparatory Causes: Sometimes the concept of cause is applied to an existent upon which the existence of an effect is really dependent, so that the separation of the effect from it is impossible, such as the causality of the self for the will and mental forms which cannot be realized or maintained apart from the self. These are called real causes.

Sometimes the concept of cause is applied to an existent which prepares the way for the appearance of

its effect, although the existence of the effect does not have a real and inseparable dependence on it, as in the case of the relation of a father to his son. This is called the preparatory cause or preliminary (mu'idd).

Exigent Causes and Conditions: Sometimes the appearance of an effect as the result of a cause depends on the existence of a specific state and quality, in which case the cause itself is called an exigent, and the necessary state and quality are called conditions. Sometimes a thing is called a condition when it brings about the above mentioned state, as the non-being of an obstacle to an effect is called an absence condition (shart- e 'adami).

Conditions are also divided into two groups: one is the condition of the agency of the agent, that is, something without which the agent is unable to perform his action, and in fact, it perfects his agency, such as the influence of knowledge on the voluntary actions of man. The other is the condition of the capability of the recipient, that is, something which must be realized in matter in order to receive a new perfection from the agent, such as the need for a fetus to satisfy some conditions in order to receive a spirit.

Material, Formal, Efficient and Final Causes: Another famous categorization which is based on induction, divides causes into four groups: One is the material or elemental cause, which is the ground for the appearance of the effect and remains interior to it, such as the elements composing a plant.

The second is the formal cause, which means the form and activity which appears in the matter, and which becomes the source of the new effects in it, such as the vegetative form. These two types of cause are internal causes, and together they compose the existence of the effect. The third type is the efficient cause (or active cause) by means of which the effect is brought about, such as someone who creates a form in matter.

The fourth type of cause is the final cause, which is the motivation of the agent for the performance of the action, such as the aim which a person takes into consideration for his own voluntary actions and performs the action for the purpose of achieving that aim. These two last types of cause are considered external causes.

It is obvious that the material cause and the formal cause are particular to material effects, composed of matter and form, and it is fundamentally problematic to apply [the concept of] cause to them.

It should be noted that the efficient cause may be described by means of two terms: one is the natural agent, which in the natural sciences is known as the efficient cause, and what is meant by it is the source of motion and change in bodies. And another is the divine agent, which is to be discussed under theology. What is meant by it is an existent which brings the effect into existence and gives it being.

The only example of it is to be found among nonmaterial objects, because natural functions are only the source of motion and change in things, and there is no natural existent which brings another existent

from nothingness into being.

Among the divine creative agents, there is an agent which itself is in no need of a creator, which is called the True Agent (Fa'íl-e Haqq), and the example of it is confined to the sacred divine essence.

Another point which must be mentioned at the end of this lesson is that all of the divisions of cause with the exception of the last are rational ('aqli) and yield mutually exclusive pairs of terms, one positive and one negative. All of them may be stated as 'mutually exclusive disjunctions' (qadhiyyah munfasilah haqiqiyyah).² However, the exegent and condition are really two special types of incomplete cause, and should not be considered as independent types of cause.

¹. In this regard there will be a further explanation in Lesson Thirty-Five

². A qaḍiyyah haqiqiyyah (literally, a verity proposition) is to be contrasted with a qaḍiyyah kharijiyyah (an external proposition). The latter depends for its truth on the existence of the referent of its subject in the external world while the former does not so depend. A qaḍiyyah munfasilah is a disjunctive proposition, so a qaḍiyyah munfasilah haqiqiyyah is a disjunctive proposition whose truth is independent of conditions in the external world, so that it becomes necessary that one or the other of its disjuncts be true.

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