

[Home](#) > [Philosophical Instructions](#) > [Part 4: Causality](#) > [Lesson 32: The Principle of Causation](#) > The Criterion of the Need for a Cause

Lesson 32: The Principle of Causation

The Importance of the Principle of Causation

As was explained earlier, ¹ the discovery of causal relations among phenomena forms the axis of all scientific efforts, and the principle of causality, as a universal and general principle, is a pillar of all sciences which deal with the laws of real objects.

On the other hand, every scientific law owes its universality and definiteness to the rational and philosophical laws of causation and without them no universal and definite law of any science could be established. This is one of the most important ways in which science is in need of philosophy.

Some of those who deny rationalism and rational principles independent of experience, or who basically do not believe that philosophical and metaphysical problems have any scientific or definitive value, try to prove the validity of the principle of causality by way of experience.

However, as has been repeatedly indicated, these sorts of efforts are useless and sterile. In order to establish the real existence of a entified thing outside the self one must rely upon the principle of causation, and without it there is no way to establish entified realities, and there will always exist room for doubt as to whether there exist realities beyond perceptions and mental images which are subjected to experience.

Furthermore, the establishment of a correspondence between perceptions and external things (after accepting them), requires subsidiary laws of causation, and as long as these laws have not been established, there will be room for doubt as to whether our mental phenomena and perceptions correspond to things in the external world, so that we may come to know of external realities by means of these laws.

Finally, if there is doubt about the laws of causation, then one cannot establish the universality and definiteness of the results of experience, and the attempt to establish the laws of causation by means of experience involves circular reasoning, that is, the universality of the results of experience is based on

the laws of causation, and this presupposes that we wish to establish these laws by means of generalization upon the results of experience and their universality.

In other words, the use of experience is possible only in case the existence of things as subjects of experience is established and the results of experience are also definitely known. And both of these are dependent upon the acceptance of the principle of causality, before setting out to experiment, for if an experimenter does not believe in the principle of causality, and he seeks to establish this by means of an experiment, he will not be able to ascertain the real existence of things experimented, for it is in the light of this principle that we ascertain the existence of a cause (an external thing) by means of the existence of its effect (a perceptual phenomenon), as was explained in Lesson Twenty- Three.

Furthermore, unless it is established with the help of the laws of causation that the causes of various changing perceptual phenomena indicating different dimensions and shapes correspond to material things, one will not be able to know definitely and certainly the attributes and characteristics of the objects of experience, so that one may be able to make judgments about the results of experiences related to them.

Moreover, the utmost that can be ascertained through sense experience are merely simultaneity or the regular succession of two phenomena in the realm of experience. However, we know that simultaneity or the succession of phenomena is more general than causality, and by means of them the causal relation cannot be established.

Finally, the problem remains that no matter how many times a sense experience is repeated, it cannot refute the possibility of an uncaused effect; that is, there will always remain the possibility that in the case of something not yet experienced the effect will occur without the cause, or while the cause exists, its effect does not occur, i.e., sense experience is insufficient to establish the universal and exigent relation between two phenomena, let alone establish the universal laws of causality regarding all causes and effects.

Hence, someone like Hume, who considers causality to amount to the simultaneity or succession of two phenomena, will be unable to escape from such doubts and misgivings, and for this reason this sort of philosophical problem has been declared to be unsolvable. Likewise, those who have inclinations toward positivism and who restrict themselves to the input of the senses cannot establish any universal and definite laws in any of the sciences.

Therefore, it is necessary to provide further explanation of the purport of the principle of causality, its value and its validity.

The Purport of the Principle of Causation

By the principle of causation is meant those propositions which denote the need of the effect for a cause,

and they imply that an effect will not occur without a cause. This matter can be expounded as a 'verity proposition' (qadhiyyah haqiqiyyah) in the following form: Every effect needs a cause.

The purport of this is that whenever an effect occurs in the external world, it will be in need of a cause, and there is no existent which can be characterized as an effect and which has come into existence without a cause. So, the existence of an effect indicates that it has been brought into existence by a cause.

This is an analytic proposition, and the concept of its predicate is obtained from the concept of its subject, for the concept of being an effect, as has been explained, consists in being an existent whose existence is dependent upon another existent of which it is in need. Hence, the concept of the subject (effect) includes the meaning of need and dependency on a cause which constitutes the predicate of the above-mentioned proposition.

Thus, it is one of the primary self-evident propositions (badihiyyat awwaliyyah) and has no need for any sort of reason or proof, and merely imagining the subject and predicate is sufficient for affirming this proposition.

However, this proposition does not denote the existence of an effect in the external world, and on the basis of it one cannot establish that in the world of being there exists an existent which is in need of a cause, for a verity proposition (qadhiyyah haqiqiyyah) is considered to be a conditional proposition, and by itself it is not capable of establishing the existence of its subject in the external world, and it denotes no more than that if an existent with the characteristic of being an effect occurs, then it cannot but have a cause.

This principle can be presented in another way, such that it denotes the existence of an instance of the subject in the external world, as in the following form: Effects which exist in the external world are in need of causes.

This can also be considered to be a self-evident proposition, for it may be analyzed into two propositions, the first of which is the same as that mentioned above, and which is a primary self-evident proposition, and another proposition, which denotes the existence of an effect in the external world and which can be obtained by means of presentational knowledge of internal effects, that is to say, it is a self-evident proposition acquired through consciousness.

However, this proposition is unable to determine which are the instances of being an effect, and it merely denotes that there are existents in the external world which are termed 'effects' and that they are in need of causes. But which of the existents in the external world are to be termed and qualified this way, is not to be obtained from this proposition.

In any case, the recognition of instances of causes and effects is not self-evident, except for those comprehended through knowledge by presence. The others require proof. First, the characteristics of

cause and effect should be determined, and with the application of these to existents in the external world the instances of cause and effect may be recognized.

Some of the Western philosophers who have not properly understood the purport of the principle of causation have imagined that its purport is that every existent is in need of a cause. Thus, according to their own speculations they have objected to the proof of the existence of God, the Exalted, based on the principle of causality.

They have objected that according to the above mentioned principle, God should also have a creator! They have overlooked the fact that the subject of the principle of causation is not simply 'existent,' but is 'an existent effect,' and since God, the Exalted, is not an effect, He is in no need of a cause or creator.

The Criterion of the Need for a Cause

Islamic philosophers have expounded a topic under the rubric 'the criterion of the need for a cause,' the conclusion of which is the determination of the subject of the principle of causality, the outcome of which is as follows.

If the subject of this proposition were simply 'existent,' this would mean that an existent in so far as it is an existent is in need of a cause, and this would imply that every existent needs a cause. However, not only is this not self-evident, but there is no reason for it, and moreover, we have a proof against it, for the proofs for the existence of God, the Exalted, signify that there also exists an existent which is not in need of a cause. So, the subject of the above mentioned proposition must be qualified. Now we must see what this qualification is.

The mutakalimin (Muslim scholastic theologians) have imagined that the qualification is 'huduth' (the property of having come into existence), that is, every existent which is hadith, and which at one time did not exist and afterward came into existence, will be in need of a cause.

So, being qadim (eternal) is considered to be confined to God, the Exalted. They argued that if an existent had existed from eternity (azali) and had no previous condition of nothingness, then it would not be in need of another existent to bring it into existence.

Contrary to them, the philosophers believed that the qualification for the subject of the noted proposition is contingency (imkan), that is, every existent which essentially has the possibility of non-being, such that the supposition of its non-being is not impossible, is in need of a cause. The shortness of length of its life will not make it needless of a cause, rather the longer its life the more it will be in need of a cause, and if it is supposed that its life is infinite, then its need for a cause will also be infinite. Thus, it is not intellectually impossible for an existent which is an effect to be eternal.

However, it is to be noted that the contingency which serves to qualify the subject and is the criterion for needing a cause is the attribute of a whatness. According to the philosophers, it is the whatness which in

and of itself requires no relation to existence or nothingness. In other words, its relation to existence and nothingness is equal, and there must be something else to bring it out of the state of equilibrium. This thing is the cause. For this reason, the criterion for the need for a cause is regarded to be essential contingency.

However, this position is homogeneous with the fundamentality of whatness, and one who accepts the fundamentality of existence would do better to rest his philosophical discussions on existence. This is why Sadr al-Muta'allihin (Mulla Sadra) claimed that the criterion of the need of an effect for a cause is the mode of its existence; in other words the criterion for the need of some existents for a self-sufficient and needless existence is their ontological poverty and innate dependence.

So, the subject of the above mentioned proposition will be 'impoverished existent' (mawjud-e faqir) or 'dependent existent.' When we take into consideration the levels of gradation of existence, in which each weaker level is dependent on a stronger level, we may take the subject of the proposition to be 'the weak existent' and the criterion of the need for a cause to be the weakness of the level of existence.

By attending to the exposition of Sadr al-Muta'allihin it is found, firstly, that the causal relation is to be sought in either the existence of the cause or the existence of the effect rather than in their whatnesses. This is a corollary of the position of the fundamentality of existence. This is contrary to the position of one who imagines that the cause brings about the whatness of the effect, or that the cause attributes existence to the whatness of the effect, or in technical terms, the making (ja'l) is related to whatness or to the attribution of whatness to existence.

Both of these positions are based on the fundamentality of whatness, and with the invalidity of this position, there is no place for such views.

Secondly, being an effect and the dependency of an effect are essential to its existence. The dependent existence will never be independent and without need of a cause. In other words, the existence of the effect is itself the very dependence on and relation to the cause which provides being. On this basis entified existence may be divided into two parts: the independent and the relational. This is the exquisite subject which we mentioned previously, and it is one of the most valuable fruits of the transcendent philosophy (of Mulla Sadra).

This requires further explanation.

1. See Lesson Nine.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/philosophical-instructions-muhammad-taqi-misbah-yazdi/lesson-32-principle-causation>