

Lesson 33: The Causal Relation

The Reality of the Causal Relation

When it is said that “the cause provides the effect with existence,” the mind associates this with someone who gives something to another who receives it. In this process there are three essences and two actions (fi‘l).

In other words five existents are assumed: one is the essence of the cause which is the provider of existence, another essence is the effect which is the receiver of the existence, the third is that very existence which is obtained by the effect from the cause, the fourth is the action of giving which is related to the cause, and the fifth is the action of receiving which is ascribed to the effect.

In truth, in the external world there is nothing but the entity of the cause and the entity of the effect. Moreover, to be precise, it cannot be said that the cause provides existence for the whatness, for whatnesses are respectival (i‘tibari) and prior to the occurrence of the effect, its whatness does not have existence even in a figurative or accidental sense.

Likewise the concepts of giving and receiving are nothing more than mental images, and if giving existence, or creating, were a real entified thing, then it would be yet another effect and it would depend on another causal relation between the action and its agent, and another giving [of existence] would be established, and so on infinitely.

Also, in the case of an effect which has not yet occurred, there is no receiver to receive anything, and after its occurrence, its receiving of existence from a cause would also be meaningless. Hence, in the case of the creation of an effect, there is no real entified existence other than the existence of the cause and the existence of the effect.

Now, the following question may be posed. What form does the causal relation take between the existence of the cause and the existence of the effect? After the occurrence of the effect, or simultaneous with it, is there something else by the name of the cause–effect relation? Or does such a

thing exist prior to its occurrence? Or is it fundamentally a mere mental concept which never has an instance in the external world? Someone who imagines that the reality of causation consists in the succession or simultaneity of two phenomena will consider causality to be a mental concept.

He will hold that there are no instances of causality except for the relation (idhafah) of simultaneity or immediate succession (a relation which is considered to be one of the nine categories of accidents).

However, there are problems with the interpretation of causality in terms of the relation of simultaneity or succession, some of which have been indicated, and to these we should add the following: No relation ever has any entified reality, and therefore, the interpretation of causality as a kind of relation is really a denial of causality as a entified objective relation, such as ventured by Hume and his followers.

Assuming that relations generally or that this particular relation is entified and based on its two terms, there is still no instance of it prior to the existence of the effect, for something which depends on two terms and is parasitic on them cannot occur without the two terms mentioned above.

If it is supposed that the relation comes into existence after or simultaneous with the occurrence of the effect, this implies that the effect in its essence has no relation with the cause, and is connected with it merely by means of an external relation, as if the above mentioned relation were a rope binding them together.

Furthermore, if this relation were a entified thing, this thing would inevitably be an effect, and the question about the quality of its relation to its cause would be repeated, and there would have to be an infinitude of causal relations!

Hence, none of the mentioned assumptions is correct. In truth, the existence of the effect is a ray radiated by the existence of the cause, as well as the relation itself and its very dependence, and the concept of possession or relation is abstracted from its essence, and in technical terms it is said that the existence of the effect is an illuminative relation (idhafah ishraqiyyah) of the existence of the cause, not a relation to be considered as belonging to one of the categories abstracted by recurring relations between two things.

In this way, existence may be divided into two parts, one relational and one independent. Every effect in relation to its creating cause is relational and dependent. Every cause in relation to the effect it creates is independent, however much it may itself be the effect of another existent, and in relation to that, it will be relational and dependent.

The absolutely independent is a cause which is not the effect of the existence of anything. This is the same topic which was used to establish the specific graduation of existence.

Knowledge of the Causal Relation

The causal relation, as analyzed and studied here, is specific to the creating cause and its effect, and does not include preparatory or material causes. At this point, two questions may be raised, one about how one can know the above-mentioned relation between creative agents and their effects, and the other about how one can prove causal relations among physical things which are preparatory causes and effects.

Earlier it was indicated that man discovers some of the instances of cause and effect within himself by means of knowledge by presence, and when he considers the direct actions of the self, and compares such things as willing and the acquiring of mental concepts with his self, and he finds them to be dependent on the self, he abstracts the concept of cause and applies it to the self and he abstracts the concept of effect and applies this to the actions of the self.

So, he observes, for example, that his willing to do some deed depends upon specific cases of conceptual (tasawwuri) and propositional (tasdiqi) knowledge, and until such cognitions are realized, the act of willing is not produced by the self.

By observing this sort of dependency which exists between knowledge and willing, the concepts of cause and effect may be further expanded so that the concept of effect may be applied to everything which has some sort of dependence upon another. Likewise, the concept of cause is generalized to everything on which something else depends in some manner. In this way, the general concepts of cause and effect take shape.

In other words, the finding of instances of cause and effect disposes the self to abstract universal concepts from them so as to include similar individuals, which is characteristic of universal concepts, as was explained in the discussion of epistemology.

For example, the concept of cause which is abstracted from the self is not in respect of its specific existence, and not in respect of its being itself, but because another existent depends upon it. So, any existent which is like this will be an instance of the concept of cause, whether it is material or immaterial, contingent or necessary.

Likewise, the concept of effect, which is abstracted from willing or any other phenomenon, is not so because it possesses a specific existence or whatness, but rather because it is dependent upon another existent. Hence it is applied to any other thing which has some sort of dependence, whether it is material or immaterial, substance or accident.

Therefore, cognition of one or more instances is sufficient for abstracting a universal concept, but the cognition of a universal concept is not sufficient for recognizing its instances. Hence, in order to know the instances which are not known by means of knowledge by presence, standards and criteria must be

found.

Furthermore, the causal relation pertaining to the creating cause which is abstracted from the essence of its effect, and the existence of the effect which is considered to be identical with the illuminative relation (idhafah ishraqiyyah), must be established beyond the self by means of an argument. That is, the question may be raised about how the existence of the self is relational and dependent in relation to another existent. How is it that the existences of the entire world emerged from another existent, and how do we know that it is not independent in itself? Such questions may be repeated regarding preparatory relations. First, how is it to be established that among material existents there are causal relations? Second, how can one establish a relation of dependence between one material phenomenon and another?

Considering the fact that creating causes cannot be found among material things, the knowledge of such causes and such causal relations beyond the realm of presentational knowledge will only be possible by intellectual methods. Empirical methods provide no way toward metaphysics. One cannot expect to be able to know creative causes by means of experimentation, the alteration of conditions, and controlling variables.

Since, moreover, it is not possible to exclude immaterial existents, so that their effects could be known by means of their elimination and inclusion and changing conditions, the only way for the establishment of the rational properties of such causes and effects is through pure rational proofs, and by means of them to determine the instances of each of them. This is contrary to the case of material causes and effects, which can be known to some extent by empirical methods.

In conclusion, there are, on the whole, three ways to knowledge of causal relations: first, through presentational knowledge for cases in the realm of the self and psychological phenomena; second, through pure rational proofs for cases of supernatural causes; and third, rational proofs based on empirical premises for cases of material causes and effects.

Distinguishing Features of Cause and Effect

The ancient philosophers did not discuss the character of knowledge of cause and effect as an independent subject. The only thing which we have obtained from their expositions is that the first cause, a cause which is not also an effect, has no whatness, contrary to objects which do have whatnesses.

Since a whatness in and of itself has no relation to existence and nothingness, it naturally will need a cause to bring it out of its state of equilibrium. In other words, every existent which has a whatness and from which a whatish concept may be abstracted will be contingent and in need of a cause.

However, this exposition, in addition to being appropriate only for the fundamentality of whatness, is ineffective and fails to resolve our difficulties, for it is only able to establish whether contingents are

effects, and it fails to present any standard for the recognition of the causation of some things with respect to others.

However, on the basis of the principles established by Sadr al- Muta'allihin, one can obtain a very clear standard for the recognition of the creative cause and its effect. These principles are: the fundamentality of existence, the relativity of the effect in relation to the creative cause, and the gradation of the planes of existence.

On the basis of these threefold principles each of which has been established in the appropriate place, it follows that every effect is at a weaker level than its creative cause, and its cause, in turn, is at a weaker level than a more perfect existent which is its creative cause, until we reach an existent which has no weakness, failure, deficiency or limitations, and it will be infinitely perfect, so that it will no longer be the effect of something.

Hence, the distinguishing feature of being an effect is the weakness of the level of existence in relation to another existent, and conversely, the distinguishing feature of being a cause is the strength and intensity of the level of existence in relation to an effect, in accordance with which the distinguishing feature of the absolute cause is the infinite intensity and perfection of existence.

Even if we cannot recognize creative causes and effects individually, we can understand that every creative cause is more perfect than its effect, and in relation to its creative cause it is more deficient, and wherever there is weakness and existential limitation, the being of an effect will be established. Since in the natural world there does not exist any infinite existent, all corporeal existents will be effects of the supernatural.

It may be said that what has been obtained from the mentioned principles is that everywhere we have two existents, one of which is the emanation of the other and is considered to be a stage of the emanating existence, it will be its effect. But the question is how can we establish that there is an existent more perfect than material existents, such that these existents are to be considered a weaker level of the more perfect existent, so that they would be effects of it?

The answer to this question is to be obtained from the principle indicated earlier, according to which being an effect is essential to the existence of the effect and is inviolable. So, it is not the case that two assumptions are involved in the realization of an existent: one that it is the effect of a more perfect existent, and the other that it is independent and without need of a cause for its occurrence. But if something has the possibility of being an effect, it is certain to be an effect.

And whenever there is an existent such that a more perfect existent than it can be imagined, it will have the possibility of being an effect, and hence it is certain to be an effect and it will no longer have the possibility of not being an effect, for if the possibility of not being an effect were also supposed, this would mean that essentially it does not require being or not being an effect.

That is, if it were an effect, its being an effect would not be essential, while in the previous discussion it became clear that being an effect is essential to the existence of the effect. Thus, something which is capable of being an effect, that is, for which one can suppose a more perfect existent, will have to be an effect.

At the end of this lesson we should note that the weakness of the level of existence has some indicators by means of which one can recognize that an existent is an effect, and among these are limitations in time and place, limitations in a thing's effects, changeability, moveability and destructibility.

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