

Lesson 34: The Causal Relation among Material Things

The Cause of Belief in the Causal Relation among Material Things

Sometimes it is said that the knowledge of the causal relation among all existents, including material existents, is an innate (fitri) knowledge with which the human intellect has been fashioned, and on the basis of which specific causes and effects are determined. However, as has been discussed in the lessons on epistemology, no acquired knowledge can be proven to be innate, and assuming that it occurs, there would be no guarantee of its correspondence with reality.

However, as has been mentioned in Lesson Twenty-Three, some knowledge is near to being self-evident (bidahat), and in a sense can be considered to be 'innate', such as knowledge of the existence of material realities, which really has its source in a hidden or semi-conscious reasoning. The knowledge of the existence of the causal relation and the dependence of some material existents on others is also of this sort.

The closer we get to the beginning of infancy, the more unconscious reasoning becomes, until it becomes similar to the instinctive perceptions of animals. To the extent that man's consciousness develops, reasoning becomes more manifestly conscious, until it takes the form of logical reasoning.

For example, when a child hears a sound simultaneously with the collision of two objects, he vaguely understands the dependence of the appearance of the noise on the collision. When he witnesses the lighting of a lamp along with the flipping of a switch, he understands there to be another dependence of the same sort. In brief, his soul becomes thus disposed to understand the existence of the causal relation among material phenomena. However, he is not able to understand this relation in the form of a logical proposition or to express it in exact terms.

Eventually he develops sufficient powers of mental analysis to understand this subject in the form of a logical proposition, and to expound the hidden foundational reasoning in the form of a logical proof. Of course, it is possible that at the beginning of this process one will use a concept which is not sufficiently precise, or one will present an argument which from a logical point of view is fallacious.

For example, one might speculate that everything depends upon something else, or that every existent appears in a specific time and place. However, these unfortunate generalizations and other inadequacies in the interpretation of percepts and reasonings, are effects of the weakness of the analytic powers of the mind, and to the extent that one develops and strengthens the above-mentioned powers by means of logical exercises and philosophical analysis one will make fewer such mistakes.

In any case, as we have explained repeatedly, the firmest foundation for belief in the existence of the causal relation is knowledge by presence. The discovery of instances of causes and effects within the self is considered to be the sturdiest basis for the abstraction of the universal concepts of cause and effect and prepares the ground for the conscious understanding of the principle of causation as a self-evident (*badihi*) proposition.

However, since material instances of cause and effect cannot be known through knowledge by presence, and on the other hand, as mentioned above, since it is unacceptable to consider the belief in the causal relation among material things to be innate, there is no alternative but to consider the source of such beliefs to lie in a kind of reasoning, which, at its inception was semi-conscious and spontaneous, and gradually takes the form of clear logical reasoning.

Since this belief is close to being self-evident it may be called, in a sense, innate. In order to evaluate this belief one must first state this proposition in an exact form, and then give a logical explanation of it.

An Evaluation of the Above-mentioned Belief

The causal relation among material things may be stated in several forms. One is: "Material existents are dependent upon one another." This proposition, which is called 'unquantified' (*muhmalah*) in logic, does not indicate the universality or particularity of this relation. That is, it does not mean that all material things have this relation with one another, or that only some of them have such a relation.

It is certain that there exists a causal relation among some of them, and really, it is evaluated as a particular affirmative proposition, the contradictory of a universal negative proposition, the absolute negation of causation among material things, which view is associated with the *Ash'arites*.

The second form is: "All material existents have a causal relation with another material existent." This means that no material existent is to be found which is neither a cause nor an effect of another material existent. This leaves open the possibility that one or more material existents are merely causes for some phenomena and that they themselves are not the effects of other material existents (although they may

be the effects of supernatural causes), the possibility also is left open that they are merely effects of material causes, and that they themselves are not causes of other material phenomena.

The third form is: “Every material existent has a material cause,” and the fourth form is: “Every material existent is the cause of another material existent and is the effect of another material existent.” An implication of the third proposition is a backward stretching infinite regress of material causes. An implication of the fourth proposition is an infinite regress in both directions.

Among these propositions, the first is certain and close to being self-evident, and it is the one which may be called innate. However, regarding the other propositions, they have been more or less in dispute and subject to differences of opinion which are presented in detailed philosophical texts under various topics.

Just as the principle of the existence of material things is not self-evident and needs to be proven, the existence of the causal relation among material things is also not self-evident. The warrant for this belief is not at the same level as the belief in the universal principle of causation, in the form of a verity proposition (qadhiyyah haqiqiyyah), nor is it on the level of the belief in the existence of the causal relation for the totality of existents, some of whose instances are known through knowledge by presence.

Rather, its logical warrant is at the level of speculative certainties (nazariyyat yaqini), which on the one hand are based on the self-evident principle of causality, and on the other hand are based on empirical premises.

That is, after the real existence of material existents is established, and idealistic doubts are refuted, then with the help of experiences which establish that some material phenomena do not occur without some others, it may be concluded that the causal relation in its general sense, that is, absolute dependency (not a dependency that is absolute), holds among material existents, and that the material existent, in addition to having a need for a creative cause at the core of its being, is also such that its changes and alterations depend on the fulfillment of various conditions which are provided by other material existents, conditions which, in reality, serve to prepare matter for the acquisition of new existential perfections, even if the previous perfection must then be abandoned.

The Way to the Knowledge of Material Causes

As was indicated, there are many ways with regard to the absolute knowledge of causes and effects, but the way to the knowledge of material causes and effects is limited to empirical proof, that is, proof in which empirical premises have also been employed.

It is sometimes imagined that the repeated observation of two successive phenomena is reason for the first phenomenon to be the cause of the second. That is, empirical premises are used for the establishment of the causation of one material existent for another, in the form: “This phenomenon repeatedly comes into existence following another phenomenon.” Then another premise must be added:

“For every two existents which occur in this form, the first is the cause of the second.” The conclusion obtained is that in the case experienced, the first phenomenon is the cause of the second phenomenon.

However, as has been shown time and time again, succession or simultaneity are more general than causation, and cannot be considered to be decisive reasons for causation, that is, the major premise of this syllogism is not certain, and therefore neither can its conclusion be certain.

Logicians, when discussing the validity of empirical propositions, have said that the mutual implication (talazum) of two phenomena, either constantly or in most cases, indicates the causal relation between them, for persistent or nearly persistent simultaneity cannot be accidental.

Regarding this statement it must be said that, first of all, this proposition implies that something accidental cannot be persistent or nearly persistent, or in technical terms, that compulsion (qasr) which occurs persistently or nearly persistently is impossible. Secondly, it is nearly impossible to establish the persistent or nearly persistent mutual implication of two phenomena, and no experimenter can claim that he has subjected most occurrences of two phenomena to experiment.

Likewise, another principle is sometimes employed to complement this proof, that two similar things will have similar effects. (“Judgment regarding similar cases of what is permissible or impermissible is one.”) Therefore, regarding cases of experimentation, if one observes the occurrence of a phenomenon under certain conditions, one will know that in other conditions which are exactly the same, the above phenomenon will also occur.

In this way the causal relation between [the conditions and the phenomenon] is discovered. However, this principle is not of very much practical efficiency, for the establishment of the complete similarity of two circumstances is no easy task.

It thus seems that the only way to utilize experience in order to establish definitively the causal relation between two given phenomena is to control the conditions for the occurrence of one phenomenon and to observe which of the controlled elements and conditions when changed alters this phenomenon, and with the existence of which conditions the phenomenon remains the same.

For example, if in the controlled environment of the laboratory one observes that only with the connection of two given wires, a light bulb is lit, and that it goes out when they are disconnected, one may conclude that the above connection is the condition for the appearance of light in the bulb (transforming the electrical energy into light).

If the conditions are precisely controlled, the performance of an experiment a single time will be sufficient. However, since the precise control of the conditions is no easy task, in order to be sure, the experiment is often performed repeatedly.

However, at the same time, it is extremely difficult to establish that the effective cause of the appearance

of a phenomenon is the very factors identified in the experimental environment and that no other unidentified and unperceived factor exists. Even more difficult than this is to establish that it is the only factor and is irreplaceable, for there is always the possibility that under other conditions the given phenomenon will occur by means of other factors.

Newer and newer discoveries in physics and chemistry confirm this possibility. This is why empirical conclusions will never have the value of the self-evident, and basically cannot produce redoubled certainty (certain beliefs whose contrary is impossible). Hence, the achievements of the empirical sciences will never have the value of the conclusions of pure rational proofs.

We should note that the existence of the mentioned possibilities which prevent the acquisition of redoubled certainty in relation to the principles of the empirical sciences is of no harm for the certainty of the causal relation among material existents, for with simple experiments it can be established that by excluding one phenomenon, another phenomenon will be eliminated. This shows that the first phenomenon is a kind of incomplete cause of the second.

For example, with the setting of the sun, the sky becomes dark; and with the absence of water, trees become dry. Thousands of other examples can be observed repeatedly in the daily lives of men. What is difficult is to determine precisely all the factors and conditions which have an effect on the occurrence of a material phenomenon.

If one were able to precisely determine all of them, this would not imply a denial of the influence of a supernatural agent, for the performance of an experiment in the case of such an agent is not possible. The existence or nonexistence of a supernatural agent can only be established with pure rational proof.

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