

Lesson 38: The Efficient Cause

Introduction

One of the most famous classifications of causes (perhaps stated for the first time by Aristotle) is that of efficient causes, final causes, material causes and formal causes, of which the first two types are called external causes and the latter two are called internal causes or 'causes of subsistence' ('ilal-e qawam), and from one perspective are called causes of whatness.

From the previous lessons it has become clear that the application (of the concept of) cause to the latter two types involves some imprecision. At the end of Lesson Thirty-One it was indicated that the material and formal causes are the very matter and form of the bodies, which are called material and formal causes in relation to compound bodies and are called matter and form in relation to each other, and which are naturally specific to material things.

Since we will discuss matter and form later, ¹ here discussion of them may be postponed. The section on Causality will be concluded with a discussion of efficient causes and final causes.

The Efficient Cause and its Types

By the efficient cause is meant an existent by which another existent (the effect) is brought about, and in its general sense it also includes natural agents which have an effect on the movements and changes of bodies.

Ancient philosophers recognized two kinds of actions and influences in the world: one is willful action (fi'l iradi) which is performed willfully by living existents which possess consciousness, actions such as movement and other properties which accord with the will of the agent, such as the voluntary (ikhtiyari) actions of man which occur in various forms; and the other kind is that of action done by existents without consciousness and without will which are monotonous and without variation.

The ancient philosophers held that there was a specific nature for each kind of corporeal existents which essentially had special requirements. For instance, each of the four elements, earth, water, air and fire,

was considered to have a propensity for its own natural location and specific natural qualities, such that, for example, if their locations were changed by means of some external factor, their natural tendency would be to move toward their original locations. In this way they justified the falling of stones, the pouring of rain and the rising of the flames of fire. They thought of nature as the source of motion.

Later, in view of the fact that occasionally motions and influences of things occur contrary to their natural propensities, a third kind of action was established called 'constrained action' (fi'l qasri). For example, due to the blowing of the wind, dust may rise toward the sky. That was related to constrained nature of dust, and it was believed that dust, which is a kind of earth, rises toward the sky by constrained motion, and that it returns to the ground by natural motion. In such cases they believed that the motion would not persist ("the constrained is not persistent").

On the other hand, in view of the fact that it is possible for a willful agent to be forced to move contrary to his own will because of the domination of a more powerful agent, another kind of agent was posited by the name of 'coercive agent' (fa'il jabri), which is to a willful agent as constrained action is to a natural agent.

Islamic philosophers deeply pondered the issue of willful agents and at first divided them into two types: one is the intentional agent (fa'il bil-qasd) and the other is the providential agent (fa'il bil-'inayah). The basis of this division was observation of the difference between willful agents which sometimes need motivation additional to their own whatnesses, such as man, who must be motivated in order to move of his own will from place to place.

This kind is called the intentional agent. Sometimes a willful agent does not require any motivation, and is called a providential agent. The agency of God, the Exalted, was considered to be of this second kind.

Later, the Illuminationists with greater precision established another kind of agent, the knowledgeable ('ilmi) and voluntary (ikhtiyari) agent, whose detailed knowledge of his action is the action itself, such as the detailed (tafsili) knowledge of a man of his own mental forms is identical with those very forms themselves, and prior to their occurrence the agent has no detailed knowledge of them, but merely has a summary (ijmali) knowledge which is identical with the essence of the agent.

It is not the case that in order to imagine something one needs to imagine previously what one imagines, and this agency (fa'iliyyah) is called agency by agreement (fa'iliyyah bil-ridha), and they consider divine agency to be of this kind.

Finally, Sadr al-Muta'allihin, under the inspiration of Qur'anic revelation and the sayings of the gnostics, established that there is another kind of knowledgeable agent. In this kind of agency the agent has detailed knowledge of the action at the station of his essence, and has that very knowledge as concise knowledge ('ilm ijmali) of its own essence.

This is called the agent by self-disclosure (fa'il bil-tajalli). The agency of God is considered to be of this

kind. In order to establish this sort of agency, he took advantage of the principles of his transcendent philosophy, especially of the special gradation and the possession by an existence-giving cause of the perfections of its own effects.

Likewise, noting that sometimes two agents along with one another are effective in the performance of an action, and the more remote agent performs the deed by means of the more proximate agent, Islamic philosophers established another kind of agency called subordinative agency (fa'iliyyah bil-taskhir), which may be conjoined with other kinds of agency. For example, the digestion of food, which is performed by means of bodily capacities, but which is under the dominion and direction of the soul, is called a subordinative action.

Then, on the basis of the principles of transcendent philosophy and in view of the fact that every cause with relation to its own existence-giving cause is pure relation, an even clearer instance of the subordinative agent is established, and an even firmer philosophical interpretation may be given of the relation of an action to numerous vertical agents, including the relation of the voluntary actions of man to man himself, and in turn to the higher sources (mabadi 'aliyyah), and to God, the Exalted.

In this way, as stated by Hakim Sabzavari, agents can be classified into eight types: natural agents (fa'il bil-tab'), constrained agents (fa'il bil-qasr), intentional agents (fa'il bil-qasd), compelled agents (fa'il bil-jabr), subordinate agents (fa'il bil-taskhir), providential agent (fa'il bil-'inayah), agent by agreement (fa'il bil-ridha), and the agent by self-disclosure (fa'il bil-tajalli).

Points Regarding the Types of Agent

1. That which was said by the ancient philosophers regarding the natural and constrained agents depended upon the established principles of ancient physics, including the theory of the four elements and their propensities in relation to their natural loci and qualities: wet, dry, heat and cold, which we now know to be invalid.

But in any case, there is no doubt that corporeal existents influence one another, and that the appearance of material phenomena depends upon the obtaining of specific grounds and conditions. Therefore, the existence of material conditions and means for the realization of corporeal effects has been and will forever continue to be valid as a philosophical principle. It is not the job of philosophy to determine the specific means and natural agents for each phenomenon. These must be established by empirical methods in the various natural sciences.

By way of example, on the basis of modern scientific theory, spatial movement can be considered an essential requisite of light, and the forces of attraction and repulsion may be construed as agents of the compulsory movement of bodies. In this way, it is more appropriate to relate action to the compulsory force, and to consider the compelled bodies as merely passive, despite the fact that according to grammar they may be considered agents, and we know that the principles of philosophy do not follow

the dictates of grammar.

2. The expression 'determination' (jabr) which is used as the opposite of 'freedom' (ikhtiyar) is sometimes seen as the antithesis of freedom and in this sense it is also applied to natural and constrained agents, but sometimes it is restricted to cases which have the capability for freedom.

The term 'determined' is used only for a voluntary agent which loses its own freedom in certain conditions under the influence of powerful external factors. The meaning of 'compelled agent' (fa'il bil-jabr) is this latter meaning. It is to be noted that losing freedom has various levels, for example, the action of someone who is coerced to do something under threat may be construed as 'compelled.'

Likewise, someone who in certain conditions has no alternative but to eat carrion to survive, is also considered to perform a 'compelled' action. But in cases of compulsion and emergency freedom is not entirely negated, but the scope of the freedom of the agent is limited in relation to ordinary circumstances.

Apparently, the sense of [the term] compelled agent used by the philosophers does not cover these cases, but they mean cases in which the freedom of the agent is totally negated. Thus it may be said that such an action is really produced by the one who forces, and its relation to the forced individual is passive, as was mentioned with regard to the case of constrained action.

3. Before the Islamic philosophers established various kinds of voluntary agents, including providential agent (fa'il bil-'inayah), agent by agreement (fa'il bil-ridha), and the agent by self-disclosure (fa'il bil-tajalli), it was imagined that voluntary agency was limited to intentional agents.

Therefore, some of the mutakallimin have thought of the agency of God, the Exalted, as being intentional. Even after the Islamic philosophers came to view the divine realm as being free of agency of this kind, which implies deficiency and attributes of contingency, some of the mutakallimin condemned them as deniers of the freedom of the Lord.

The truth is that the highest level of freedom is restricted to the sacred divine essence, and its lowest level exists in intentional agents. In order to clarify this subject, it is necessary to explain something about will and freedom.

Will and Freedom

The expressions, will and freedom has various applications which are more or less related to one another, but neglect of these differences is occasion for confusion and mistake. For this reason we will first indicate the cases in which each of them is used, then we will compare them with the types of agents.

Will

The expression 'will' (iradah) has a general meaning which is roughly synonymous with desiring and favoring, and with this meaning it is also used with respect to God, the Exalted, as in the case of man it is recognized as a spiritual quality (the opposite of repugnance).

In this respect it is similar to knowledge ('ilm), which on the one hand includes the essential knowledge of the Divinity, and on the other hand includes the acquired knowledge of man, which is considered to be a spiritual quality. God willing, in the section on theology a further explanation of this will be given. It is to be noted that the expression [God's] 'revealed will' (iradah-ye tashri'i), which is applied to the voluntary actions of another agent, also is an instance of 'will' in its general meaning.

The second meaning of 'will' is that of deciding to perform some deed, and this depends upon the idea (tasawwur) of the deed and affirmation (tasdiq) of some benefit (including pleasure), and it is considered to be a 'real differentia' (fasl al-haqiqi) of animal (that which moves by will), and it is also considered a characteristic of the intentional agent.

There have been discussions of the true significance (haqiqat) of 'will' and many philosophers have considered it to be a kind of spiritual quality and the opposite of 'repugnance.' However it seems that 'will' in this sense is an action of the soul, and has no opposite, although with a certain amount of fudging the opposite of it can be considered to be a state of wonder or vacillation.

A more specific sense of 'will' is restricted to rational existents, and it means a decision which results from rational preference, and in this sense it is not used for animals. According to this meaning, a willful action is synonymous with a planned action, and is the opposite of an instinctive action or one done for pure enjoyment.

Freedom

The term 'freedom' also has a general meaning which is the opposite of pure determinism, and it means that an intelligent agent performs a deed on the basis of his own desire without being forced by another agent.

The second meaning of 'freedom' is that an agent has two opposite inclinations and prefers one over the other, and in this meaning, it is equivalent to selection and choice, and it is a criterion for duty, reward and punishment.

The third meaning is the choice of a deed on the basis of the agent's internal inclination, and another person can never exert any influence on its performance. It is the opposite of 'compulsory action' which is performed under pressure or under the threat of another.

The fourth meaning is the choice of a deed which is not influenced by the limitations of one's possibilities

or the straits in which the agent finds himself. It is the opposite of an 'urgent deed' which is performed under the influence of such limitations. According to this meaning, someone who in time of famine has no choice but to eat carrion in order to survive, does not act freely, even though he may be called free in some other sense.

Now, in view of the various meanings of will and freedom, we will review the types of cognitive agents.

The intentional agent (fa'il bil-qasd) can be considered an agent possessing all the three meanings of will, for his deed is favored, is decided upon, and the decision is made on the basis of rational preference. Only a group of intentional actions which are done for pure enjoyment will not be willful.

The intentional agent can also have freedom in all the four senses, although there are some types of intentional deeds which cannot be considered free in the second, third or fourth senses; however, all of them will be free in the first sense.

For example, breathing, which man has no inclination to abandon, is not free in the second sense. A forced deed will not be free in the third sense. Eating carrion in time of famine is not free in the fourth sense. Nevertheless, all of these actions are free in the first sense, for it is not the case that the freedom of the agent is totally negated.

With regard to the providential agent (fa'il bil-'inayah), the agent by agreement (fa'il bil-ridha), and the agent by self-disclosure (fa'il bil-tajalli), these will be considered willful only in the first sense, for these agents do not need to think or decide.

Likewise, they are considered to be free in the first, third, and fourth senses because they do not perform their deeds under compulsion, the pressure of external factors or conditions. It is only in the second sense that these agents cannot be considered free, for it is not necessary for them to choose between opposing motivations.

Thus, it has become clear that will, in the first sense, and freedom, in the first sense, are always equivalent in extension, but will in the second and third senses is more specific than freedom in the first, third, and fourth senses, for it does not apply to the providential agent (fa'il bil-'inayah), the agent by agreement (fa'il bil-ridha), and the agent by self-disclosure (fa'il bil-tajalli), and the opposite of freedom in the mentioned meanings can be applied to all these cases. In this way it becomes clear that the denial of will in the second and third senses with regard to God, the Exalted, or completely immaterial things, does not mean the denial of the freedom of such agents.

It has also become clear that will, in the sense of decision to perform a deed can be considered a free action, although, it is not a kind of intentional action, and is not based on the will and decision of another. Perhaps the soul in relation to the will may be considered an agent by self-disclosure (fa'il bil-tajalli).

Finally, the conclusion is obtained that the highest levels of freedom are restricted to God, the Exalted,

for He is not only free from the influence of external factors, but is also free of opposing internal inclinations. Then, completely immaterial things have degrees of freedom, for they are only under the subordination of the Divine will, but there is no sort of pressure exerted upon them and they are not subject to internal conflicts, and they are not subject to the domination of one inclination over others.

However, the souls attached to matter, such as man, have the lowest level of freedom, and their wills can be shaped more or less under the influence of external factors. At the same time all of their free actions are not of the same level, and, for example, man's freedom in the creation of mental forms (which is a sort of action by agreement) is much more free and perfect than his freedom to perform physical deeds (which are intentional actions), for the latter deeds are in need of non-voluntary conditions.

1. In Lesson Forty-Six.

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