

Lesson 40: The Purposefulness of the Cosmos

Introduction

The final cause, in the sense which has been explained, is specific to voluntary actions, but according to that which has been reported from Aristotle, it seems that he held that natural actions also have final causes, and those who followed the Peripatetics also accepted this, and they considered the denial of final causes for natural actions to be equal to regarding them as being accidental.

Contrary to the assertion that natural events are accidental, according to a view which has been attributed in various forms to Democritus, Empedocles, and Epicures, there is a final cause for all phenomena.

We shall first state the reported position of Aristotle and its criticism, then we will explain something about chance and accident, and finally we will state the correct meaning of the ‘purposefulness of the cosmos.’

Aristotle’s View regarding the Final Cause

In the first book of the *Metaphysics*, after mentioning the views of the ancient philosophers regarding the cause of the appearance of phenomena, Aristotle asserts that none of them have precisely taken into consideration the final cause. Then with the analysis of motion and change of material existents, he concludes that every moving or changing existent is traveling toward an end which is its perfection, and the motion itself, which is a prelude for reaching the above-mentioned end, is considered to be its first perfection.

Hence, motion is defined as “the first perfection of a potential existent qua potential.”¹ He adds that every existent has its own specific perfection, and for this reason, every moving thing has a determinate end which it wants to reach. This perfection is sometimes the same form which it wants to take, such as the form of the oak tree for the acorn while it is in the process of germinating and growing.

Sometimes it is one of its accidents, such as a stone which is moving from the sky to the ground, in which case coming to rest on the ground is one of its accidents and perfections. In conclusion, every natural existent has a specific natural inclination toward a determinate end, which causes motion in the direction of that end and destination, and this is the same as the final cause for the occurrence of motion and the determination of its direction.

Aristotle considered the whole cosmos to be a single existent, whose nature includes all particular natures (such as mineral, vegetable and animal), and since its reaching its own perfection is due to a specific proportion between particular natures, and specific qualities and quantities in the individuals of each of them, the natural inclination of the cosmos toward its own perfection causes the establishment of a special order and arrangement among its phenomena, each of which is considered to be one of its parts or members.

Criticism

It seems that this position confuses two meanings of end (which were indicated in the previous lesson), and in any case, it is disputable in various respects.

1. Assuming that this position is correct, it can establish only the final cause of the motion and change of corporeal existents, not that of all effects whether material or immaterial, moving or at rest.
2. In view of the fact that natural agents are 'agents by nature' (fa'il bil-tab') and lack consciousness and will, relating 'natural inclination' to them will be no more than metaphorical, just as chemists consider some elements to have a 'tendency to form compounds.'

The assumption of the denial of consciousness and will to agents by nature and the establishment of true desire and inclination (which implies some sense of consciousness) for them is a self-contradictory assumption.

However, if 'natural inclination' is interpreted as 'direction of motion,' a direction required by the nature of the moving existent, and is considered to be an expression based on simile and metaphor, in this case, a fact by the name of 'final cause' will not have been established, and at the most the conclusion which can be obtained is that every motion which is required by the nature of the moving object, also has its direction determined by the requirements of its nature.

3. As will be stated in future sections, the fact that the end of motion is a perfection for all moving objects cannot be established in the sense that moving objects always become more perfect with their movement, so that one can interpret motion in the light of this as 'the first perfection,' for many motions and changes are declinings and decreasings, such as the shrinking motion of plants and animals, the declining process of which toward dryness and death begins after their having reached the end of their growth.

Likewise the coming to rest of a stone on the ground and the like cannot be considered to be perfections of minerals. Therefore, on the assumption that a correct meaning may be considered for the natural inclination of every existent towards its own perfection, declining motions and those which are not toward perfection will still lack final causes.

4. It is extremely difficult to establish the real unity of the natural cosmos and likewise to establish its natural desire for perfection and to explain the cause of the design and harmony of the parts of the cosmos in terms of such desire.

Similarly, the assumption of the existence of a universal soul for the cosmos and the existence of its spiritual yearning toward perfection is at the very least an ungrounded assumption, and thus far we have not found any proof to establish it. If a soul and spiritual yearning are to be established for the natural cosmos, then its motion must be understood as 'intentional' rather than 'natural,' and thus the existence of a final cause for its actions will not be a kind of final cause for natural actions.

The Solution to Several Problems

Here, it is possible that several problems will come to mind: one is that if natural actions do not have final causes, then phenomena will be accidental, while belief in accidentality and chance is invalid.

Another is that with the denial of the final cause for natural phenomena an intellectual explanation cannot be given for the arrangement of the wonderful order and harmony which governs the cosmos. The third is that if among natural actions and their ends there existed no necessary relation, then no natural phenomenon would be predictable. For example, it would be rational to expect that from an acorn an olive tree may grow.

In order to answer the first problem, it is first necessary to explain something about chance and accident and their several meanings. When it is said that a certain event occurred by chance or by accident, it is possible that one may intend any of the following six meanings:

1. The supposed event has no efficient cause. It is self-evident that chance in this sense is impossible, but this has no relation to the problem under discussion.
2. It is not expected that the action should have been performed by such an agent, as it is said, "Such and such a virtuous person accidentally committed a great sin." This sort of chance is not impossible, and the truth of the matter is that in such cases excessive lust or anger dominated him, and in reality, his avoidance of sin is conditional upon the absence of such abnormal and rare states. In any case, in this sense as well, chance has no relation to the subject in question.
3. The willful agent performs the action without purpose, and an intentional deed takes place without a final cause. This supposition is also erroneous, for, as was explained in the previous lesson, the final cause does not always influence [the agent] consciously. In those cases in which it is imagined that an

intentional action has been performed without a purpose, in reality there was a purpose but it was not completely conscious.

4. A willful agent has performed a deed for a specific objective, but it has a result which was not intended, as someone who digs a well in order to reach water, but by chance discovers a treasure. Such chance is not impossible, but this does not imply that an intentional action occurs without a final cause, because the final cause is that for which there is hope in the soul of the agent. However, the external fulfillment of that hope does not have any causal relation to the action, but rather is an effect which results under certain conditions.

5. A phenomenon which is absolutely not intended by anyone. This is the same opinion advanced by materialists in relation to the appearance of this cosmos, but in the view of the theists, all the phenomena of the cosmos occur and will occur on the basis of Divine Will. This will be explained in the appropriate place.

6. A phenomenon which does not occur by the intention of the proximate natural agent. This is the subject at issue. This sort of chance (if one can call it chance at all) not only is not impossible, but, in view of the meaning of 'natural agent' and the acceptance of its existence, will be necessary.

Considering the various meanings of chance, it has become clear that the denial of intention and purpose for natural agents does not mean the acceptance of chance in an erroneous sense. Moreover, the answer to the second problem has now become clear as well, for the denial of intention and purpose for the universal nature of the cosmos (supposing that such a nature exists) or for particular natures—in Aristotelian terms—does not imply the denial of the purposefulness of the cosmos.

According to theists, all the agents of the cosmos, whether immaterial or material, are under the dominion of the Divine Will, and divine agency presides over all agencies, and thus, there is no motion or rest in the cosmos which is not in conformity to the ontological will [iradah-ye takwini, as opposed to iradah-ye tashri'i, the revealed will] of God, as will be explained in the section on theology, and in this way the design and harmony of the phenomena of the cosmos will be more clearly explained.

As to the third problem, it must be said that a constant or frequent occurrence of specific predictable results is due to the homogeneity between cause and effect, that is, acorns are homogeneous only with oak trees, not with other phenomena. Admission of the homogeneity between them does not mean the acceptance of something called 'natural inclination' in the acorn which we should consider as the final cause of the oak tree.

The Purposefulness of the Cosmos

As was indicated, materialist philosophers consider all the phenomena of the cosmos (except for those which are brought about by means of man and animals) to be accidental and without purpose (in the fifth

sense of chance mentioned above). However, theistic philosophers deem natural phenomena to be purposeful, as well, but they explain the purposefulness of the cosmos in various different ways, among which the main ways are as follows:

1. Aristotelians hold that for every nature there is specific inclination toward a determinate end which causes motion towards it, and likewise for the entire cosmos, they believe it has a nature whose inclination towards its own perfection causes the proportion, harmony and coherence of its particular kinds of phenomena. We have already criticized this theory and have recounted its difficulties.
2. A group of the Neoplatonists, followers of the school of Alexandria, and 'urafa (mystics or gnostics) held that for every existent there is a kind of consciousness and will, no matter how weak and faint.

In this way they responded to some of the difficulties which were raised regarding the Aristotelian theory. According to this theory, all the agents of the cosmos will be intentional agents, and the agent by nature and by compulsion must be omitted from among the kinds of agents, for the conjunction of the acceptance of the agent by nature and the establishment of consciousness and will for each agent (as is implied by their words) implies a contradiction.

Likewise, the establishment of consciousness for natural agents is not compatible with the necessity for the knower to be immaterial (as will be explained in the appropriate place). In any case, the least of the difficulties of this position is that this matter cannot be established by proof.

3. The third way is that natural agents are subordinated agents and beyond their agency there is an agency of a higher source and ultimately the agency of God, the Exalted. In this way, all events have a purpose and final cause, not within nature but in the essences of the supernatural agents, and that which occurs in the natural cosmos is the destination of motion, not final causes!

Basically, according to the theory of the fundamentality of existence, it must be said that natures in the sense of whatnesses are respectival and have no implications bearing upon ontological matters. Specific existents which are considered to be individuals with unconscious natures have no will or intention for their own perfection or for the perfection of the cosmos, nor do they have any intention for the lack of it.

Causal relations connect them with each other to such an extent that it has brought about this wonderful design, and in this sense, each of them has a share in the establishment of this design, but not in the sense of having an intention or will in relation to it, and not in the sense that the design is imposed on them by compulsion or force (jabri).

There are more precise discussions regarding the attribution of will and purpose to God, the Exalted, which, God willing, will be treated in the discussions of theology.

[1.](#) This definition will be explained in Lesson Fifty-Five.

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