

[Home](#) > [Philosophical Instructions](#) > [Part 6: The Immutable And The Changing](#) > [Lesson 53: A Continuation of the Discussion of the Potential and the Actual](#) > The Temporal Creation of the Material World

Lesson 53: A Continuation of the Discussion of the Potential and the Actual

The Correspondence of Potentiality and Actuality in the Case of Change

Focusing on the concepts of potentiality and actuality, it is clear that three conditions are necessary for their abstraction:

1. Two existences are to be compared with one another. Therefore, nothingness cannot be considered an instance of potentiality or actuality.
2. One of the two existences must be temporally prior to the other in order for potentiality to be ascribed to it. Therefore, two simultaneous existents cannot be potential or actual with regard to each other.
3. The potential existent, or at least a part of it, must remain in the actual existent. For this reason, an existent which is completely destroyed cannot be considered to be potential in relation to a later existent.

Given these points, it is clear that the first of the types of change [mentioned in Lesson Fifty-Two] is not a kind of transformation from potentiality to actuality, because the earlier condition is nothingness while the potential is to be abstracted from existence.

Likewise, the second type of change is irrelevant to potentiality and actuality because the earlier condition is nothingness and actuality is not abstracted from nothingness.

In the third type, although one existent replaces another, since there is no common factor between them; one cannot be considered potential with regard to the other.

In the fourth type, the earlier existent is entirely potential with respect to the later existent and remains

within it; hence, the actual existent is more perfect than the potential existent.

In the fifth type, the actual existent is less perfect than the potential existent, because only part of the earlier existent remains and nothing is added to it.

In the sixth type, the superiority, inferiority or equality in perfection of the actual existent in comparison to the potential existent depends upon whether the part which is substituted for the destroyed part is more, less, or equally perfect in its level of existence.

However, in the seventh type, potentiality and actuality are the beginning and end of motion and motion is this gradual progression from potentiality to actuality, and in the context of motion, actual parts do not exist so that some may be considered potential with respect to others.

However, regarding the fact that motion is continuous, and whatever is continuous may be infinitely divided into parts, potential parts of it may be taken into consideration in the sense that if, for example, a single motion were divided into two halves, in such a way that a specific midway point appeared, the amount of each of the two parts of the motion would be equal to one half of the amount of the entire motion.

Particular attention should be paid to the fact that this way of viewing potential existence for the parts of motion, is other than the way the potentiality of an earlier part was viewed with respect to a later part.

The same point applies to type thirteen (accidental motion), although normally the expressions ‘actual’ and ‘potential’ are applied to substantial existents, even though potentiality as a dispositional quality (kayf isti‘dadi) is considered to be a kind of accident.

Types eight, nine and ten may be considered like types one, two and three, with the difference that in types eight, nine and ten substantial subjects may be considered to be potential with regard to the attribution of accidents. Likewise types eleven and twelve as well as fourteen and fifteen may be considered analogous to types four and five.

It may be concluded that for all the types of change except for the first three, the changed thing may be considered potential and that into which it changes may be considered actual. Indeed, the basis of the position of those who deny the existence of these three types is that they consider change to be equal to a transfer from the potential to the actual. Therefore it is necessary to investigate this problem to see whether instances can be found for the three above- mentioned posits.

Infinite Regresses of Material Events

In the language of philosophy, it is well known that every material phenomenon is preceded by matter and time. A general requirement of this principle is that the appearance of a material existent from pure nothingness is considered to be impossible. Accordingly, the first and third of the fifteen types of change

will be denied.

Since prime matter is considered to possess infinite potentiality, an infinite regress of events extending into the future is considered to be possible, the occurrence of which is proven on the basis of absolute divine grace and the absence of stinginess in the higher sources (mabadi 'aliyah), which imply the denial of the second type of change.

On the other hand, the mutakallimin and some of the philosophers, such as Mir Damad, hold that the material world has a temporal beginning. In order to refute the hypothesis of an infinite regress of events into the past they rely on the claim that an infinite regress is invalid. Likewise, the above-mentioned claim is used to prove the temporal end of the material world.

Accordingly, this problem is related to the problem of the temporal creation of the world, even though there is no implication between them, and it is possible that one might hold that the world has no temporal beginning while at the same time holding that it is not impossible for a material existent to appear without a preexistent matter.

It is also possible for one to hold that the material world will exist eternally, without considering it impossible for a material phenomenon to be destroyed entirely, positing the infinite series of events from pre-eternity to post-eternity on the basis of constant divine generosity.

Here we will first investigate the principle of 'the necessity of the priority of matter for every material phenomenon' and then we will refer to the problem of the temporal eternity and creation of the world.

The Principle of the Necessity of the Priority of Matter to Material Events

It was previously indicated that on the basis of innumerable observations, various transformations are always taking place in material things, and new phenomena replace the previous phenomena, so that the relation of potentiality and actuality occurs among them.

However, complete induction with regard to all material events is not possible, for no human being has existed from the beginning of the world and no one has yet experienced the end of the world. One cannot discover the definite cause of the priority of matter from the cases which have been observed and consider this principle to be an empirical one. For this reason, philosophers have sought to establish this principle rationally, as with the following proof.

Prior to becoming an existent, every material phenomenon has a possibility for existence; if there were not such a possibility the assumed phenomenon would be either a necessary or an impossible existent. Since this possibility is not substantial, there must be a substance to which the possibility is attributed, and this is what is called 'matter.' So, the priority of matter for every material phenomenon is necessary.

Several aspects of this explanation are debatable.

1. In this explanation it is assumed that for every material phenomenon there is a previous time for which the possibility of the existence of the assumed phenomenon is proved, while time is one of the dimensions of material existence and does not have an existence separate from that of material existents. If the series of events had a temporal beginning, there would be no time prior to it.
2. With the denial that a material event can be a necessary or an impossible existent, its contingency is established, and this is an essential contingency which is abstracted from the whatness of a thing. It is not something entified which could be the subject of predication.
3. In Lesson Forty-Eight it was proved that dispositional possibility is also something abstracted from the availability of conditions of existence and nonexistence prior to the occurrence of the phenomenon.

However, for the first material phenomenon no prior conditions can be considered; and in the discussions of cause and effect it was shown that material causes and conditions can only be established through experience, and we do not have sufficient experience to establish the necessity of prior conditions for all phenomena.

The Temporal Creation of the Material World

The problem of the temporal creation of the material world is one of the most controversial problems of philosophy, which has always been a topic of conflict and debate. The mutakallimin were especially insistent on proving it and considered it to be implied by the principle of causality. As was indicated in the discussions of cause and effect, they considered newness (huduth) to be the criterion for needing a cause.

On the other hand, most of the philosophers believed in the temporal pre- eternity of the material world, and have given reasons for their own views, including reliance on the above-mentioned principle whose inadequacy has become clear.

Another reason given by them is based on the pre-eternity of divine grace and the absence of stinginess in the higher sources. However, this reason will be useful only in case the possibility of the pre-eternity of the world is proved and its occurrence dependent on divine grace. Hence, those who believe in the temporal creation of the world have tried to prove the impossibility of the pre- eternity of the world, and they have tried to reject the possibility of an infinite series of events extending into the past by means of the invalidity of infinite regresses.

Philosophers accept the proofs for the impossibility of infinite regresses only in cases in which the links of the regresses exist simultaneously together and a true ordering exists among them. Therefore, they allow the infinity of successive events and exclude simultaneous events which are not truly ordered from the proofs of the impossibility of infinite regresses.

With the acceptance of these two conditions, Mir Damad considered the collection of successive events in the [meta-temporal] realm of perpetuity (dahr) to be sufficient for an infinite regress proof. For this reason, he has denied the possibility of a series of events extending infinitely into the past. If the collection of the links of the regress in perpetuity is sufficient, then one can also deny a series of events extending infinitely into the future.

But the main point is that there is controversy about proofs for the impossibility of infinite regresses produced with links other than true causes, but this is not the occasion to pursue the matter further. For this reason, it is extremely difficult to set up a proof either for the possibility or impossibility of an infinite regress of events, whether extending into the past or the future.

It may be concluded that although divine effusion (faydh, grace) does not require any sort of limitation, the bestowal of divine effusion hinges on the capability and possibility of receiving it. Perhaps the material world does not have the capability for receiving pre-eternal and post-eternal effusion. But just as philosophers have not considered limitations on the volume of the world to be incompatible with the extension of divine effusion, its temporal finitude must not be considered incompatible with the constancy of divine effusion.

In truth, we have not found a rational proof neither for the temporal nor the spatial finitude of the world, nor have we found one for the absence of temporal or spatial finitude. For this reason, we place this problem in the 'court of probable possibility'¹ until we see a definitive reason in favor of one side or the other.

¹. An allusion to the advice of Ibn Sina at the end of his Isharat: "Beware that your smartness and detachment from the vulgar do not make you go on denying everything, for that is rashness and weakness. Your strong rejection of that whose clarity is not yet made evident to you is no less a mistake than your strong belief in that whose evidence does not lie in your hands.

Rather you must hold on to the line of suspending judgment—even if you are disturbed by the denial of what your hearing recognizes as true—as long as its impossibility is not demonstrable for you. Thus, it is appropriate that you relegate such a thing to the court of possibility, unless you have firm proof otherwise." Cf., Shams Inati, *Ibn Sina and Mysticism* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996), p. 107.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/philosophical-instructions-muhammad-taqi-misbah-yazdi/lesson-53-continuation-discussion-potential>