

Lesson 6: The Argument of Contingency

In Islamic theology, the argument of contingency (فقدان) is of special importance in that it is called the “special way” of the theologians. The argument of contingency has been described in various ways in the books of scholastic theology,¹ and explicitly discussed in traditions (اخبار) ²

This argument consists of two premises and a conclusion:

Premise 1: The universe is contingent (فقدان).

Premise 2: Anything contingent is in need of a Maker.

Conclusion: The universe is in need of a Maker.

The second premise of this argument is rational and axiomatic, and those who deny the existence of God also accept it as it is a corollary of the principle of causation. And the proof of its first premise is as follows:

1. The universe is changeable and alterable.
2. Anything which is changeable and alterable is contingent.

Therefore, the universe is contingent.

The second premise of this reasoning is also axiomatic and its being so can be known by reflecting upon the reality of change, for ‘contingency’ (فقدان) means coming into existence after being non-existent; furthermore, anything which is changeable and alterable has no permanence and stability, and any state of it is preceded by non-existence, and since this peculiarity is universal, contingency is also universal and all-encompassing.

The first premise of this argument can be attained through sensory observation, because both outward observation and scientific discovery testify to the motion (تحريك) and evolution in the universe, as also confirmed by philosophical argument.³

In asserting the argument of contingency, ‘Allāmah al-ʿAbadī has said:

“Basic observation proves, as can also be found out through scientific curiosity, that the components of the universe have existential connection to one another, and this connection or interrelatedness is not only true to a particular set of components of the universe; in fact, wherever we focus our attention and examine thoroughly, we will discover better the root of this relationship.”⁴

In its own existence, the universe is changeable and alterable; that is, it comes into existence after being non-existent, for once we assess the happenings in the universe in whatever way, we will finally arrive at the universal motion (positional-spatial motion or substantial motion). Motion is existence after non-existence and being mixed with non-being, and as the law of cause and effect demands, any contingent being needs a cause in order to exist.

Objection

It is true that matter (*maddah*) is in constant motion and change, and motion and change, in turn, necessitate renewal (*tajaddud*) and contingency, but the same concomitance makes renewal and contingency perpetual and permanent for matter. That is, matter’s nature of being alterable and in constant motion shall be perpetual and permanent and anything which is perpetual and permanent is not in need of any cause.

Reply

Motion and change are characteristics of matter, and matter is qualified (*mawḍūʿ*) as ‘object in motion’. As such, in relation to motion matter serves as recipient or object. For this reason, it makes no difference whether motion can be distinguished from matter or not, and as reason dictates and experience testifies to the emergence of a phenomenon, the existence of the recipient is not sufficient because the existence of the agent is also necessary. It is thus impossible for the mover (*muḥarrak*) to be identical with the moved (*mutaḥarrak*) object. As the law of causation dictates, therefore, motion is in need of a cause other than its recipient matter, whether the motion is essentially inseparable to the matter or separable to it.⁵

This discourse does not also contradict the law of inertia in physics because the substance of the said law is that in preserving the motion it has, a physical body is in need of an external factor and it is in need of the external factor only in terms of changing the position or speed of the motion. And the substance of the rational principle is that the contingency of the motion necessitates an external cause although it is possible that the said cause considers the motion essential and inseparable to the body such that for the continuity of the motion, it may not be in need of an external cause.

Given this, the incorrectness of the assumption of the perpetual and moving matter in interpreting the emergence of the phenomena in the world of nature becomes clear, because the sole perpetuity of their

existence is not sufficient to explain their motion. Motion needs not only a recipient (*mutaʿarrrik* or the moving object) but also an agent (*mutaʿarrak* or mover). In this regard, 'Allāmah al-ʿabḥabī has said:

“Matter which can only possibly have components, forms and properties and nothing else cannot create their activity, just like cotton which has the capacity to become clothes. This capability alone cannot make it become clothes and the cotton cannot be worn; rather, other factors such as spinning, weaving and sewing machines must get involved... Regarding influence (*taʿthir*), the effector (*muʿaththar*) must create the effect (*athar*) and regarding the state of being impressed (*taʿaththur*), the impressed one (*mutaʿaththar*) must be devoid of effect, and of course, lackness (*wjdan*) cannot be created, and for this reason, matter which is the bearer of possibility and potentiality of a thing cannot by itself have the capability of the said thing which it does not have.

“It is true that the actualities which matter bring into existence come into existence through analysis and synthesis and the emergence of suitable conditions, but it must be seen whether or not only the possibility of analysis and synthesis in matter can bring the actuality of analysis and synthesis into existence, and whether or not the possibility of conditions is identical with the actuality of the conditions.”⁶

The Second Principle of Thermodynamics and the Universe's Contingency

The second principle of thermodynamics which is a law in physics states the fact that if two bodies – warm and cold – are beside each other, the heat of the first body will transfer to the second body and this transfer of heat will continue until an equilibrium of heat between the two bodies is attained and it is not possible for the contrary to spontaneously happen. This process is also called “entropy or tendency to equilibrium”; that is, if we leave the bodies by themselves, they will incline to equilibrium. Mechanical and heat equilibrium is the natural state of bodies.

Sometimes this law is also called “tendency to disorder” and the reason for this is that the state of disorder of the energy molecules is their most improbable state, and their state of disorder is their most probable state. For example, for all the air molecules of a room where we are situated to be located in a particular corner is rationally possible but it is so improbable. On the other hand, their being dispersed in the different parts of the room is so probable and possible.

Therefore, the dispersion of energy and its synthesis is more probable and more natural than its concentration in one location. For this reason, the tendency to attain equilibrium (natural state) is equal to the tendency to end up with disorder in the abovementioned meaning.⁷

Of course, it must be noted that the state of equilibrium does not mean internal stability. Inside every system, there is a strong heat motion. Every physical body at every moment, therefore, is subject to

transformation. That is, the mutual formation of its molecules differs from moment to moment.^{[8](#)}

Frank Allen,^{[9](#)} a biological physics professor, says:

“The second law of thermodynamics has proved that the universe is constantly moving toward the state in which all bodies reach an equally low degree of heat and there will be no more consumable energy. In that state, life will no longer be possible. If the universe had no beginning and has always existed ever since, it must have come into existence from such state of inactivity and stagnation.”^{[10](#)}

Bertrand Russell's Objection

Although Bertrand Russell^{[11](#)} accepts the argument of the said law of physics on the contingency of the universe, he regards as incorrect to cite it as proof of the existence of God. [He says:]

“Can we draw a conclusion here that the universe has been created by a creator – whereas by resorting to the laws derived from the method of drawing acceptable scientific conclusion, the answer is definitely negative? There is no existing proof that the universe has not come into existence spontaneously, except that this matter seems strange. In nature, however, there is no existing law which shows that the things which seem strange to us must not come into being.

Drawing a conclusion on the existence of God is synonymous with drawing a conclusion on the existence of a cause, and causative conclusions are only permissible in the realm of science when they begin with causal laws. Creating [something] out of nothing is something which is impossible in practice. As such, to suppose that the universe has been created by a creator is in no way more logical than the premise that the universe has come into being without any cause, because both the two violate the causal laws which we can observe with a single power (uniformly).”^{[12](#)}

Reply

Russell's objection is derived from his positivist foundation of epistemology. That is based on the principle of sensory acceptance of reality in the sense that any idea which cannot be tested through sensory experiment has no scientific value and is unacceptable. Yet, this foundation is also rejected by contemporary philosophers of science and its most manifest flaw is that this very claim of the positivists is also a piece of information which is not also a product of the senses and cannot be tested and experienced by the senses.

In principle, as stated in the fifth lesson, without relying on a series of rational principles, no empirical law – including the principle of non-contradiction, the law of causation and the principle of uniformity of nature – can be proven [to be true].

Human knowledge, therefore, can be classified into two, viz. rational and non-rational. Some components of the rational knowledge are so crucial and fundamental that denial of them necessitates

denial of the human knowledge as a whole. On this basis, we maintain that the need of the phenomenon for a phenomenon-maker and of the originated for an originator is one of the rational axioms, and confirming it does not change anything but the correct conception of its components (originated, originator, need).

In this way, it is true that none of the two assumptions – the spontaneous coming into existence of the universe and the creation of the universe by an Intelligent Creator – can be tested and experimented by the senses and for this reason, they have equal position, but it is not so from the rational perspective. Reason regards the first assumption as unacceptable and the second assumption as acceptable. Likewise, this judgment of reason actually follows its judgment regarding the principle of causation.

Review Questions

1. Explain the premises of the argument of contingency.
2. Write down the argument of contingency in the words of the late ‘Allamah al-‘Abab’.
3. Write down the necessary concomitance of matter and change regarding the argument of contingency along with its refutation.
4. How can the argument of contingency be proved to be true by applying the second law of thermodynamics?
5. State the objection of Bertrand Russell to the argument of contingency along with its refutation.

1. In this regard, see Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *Al-Ma‘ali al-‘iliyah*, vol. 1, pp. 200–232; Mu‘aqqiq al-‘as, *Qaw‘id al-‘Aq‘id*, pp. 39–45; Sayyid Shar‘f Gurgan, *Shar‘ al-Mawqif*, vol. 8, pp. 3–4.

2. In this regard, see *Al-Ilhiyyat fi Madrasat Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a).

3. It refers to the trans-substantial motion argument initiated and proved by ‘adr al-Muta‘allih.

See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *‘adr al-Din Shahrastani and His Transcendent Theosophy: Background, Life and Works* (Tehran: Institute of Humanities and Cultural Studies, 1997), pp. 85–97. [Trans.]

4. *U‘l-e Falsafeh wa Rawish-e Realism*, vol. 5, pp. 91–93.

5. For further information in this regard, see the essay about cause and effect in volume 3 of *U‘l-e Falsafeh wa Rawish-e Realism*.

6. *U‘l-e Falsafeh wa Rawish-e Realism*, vol. 5, pp. 17–18.

7. A. Kitaikarudiski and L. Landau (?), *Fizik Bar‘ye Hameh* (Physics for All), trans. Mu‘ammad Y‘sin, pp. 404–409.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 433.

9. John "Jack" Frank Allen (1908–2001): a Canadian-born physicist who discovered, along with Pyotr Leonidovich Kapitza and Don Misener, the superfluid phase of matter in 1937 using liquid helium in the Royal Society Mond Laboratory in Cambridge, England. [Trans.]

10. *Ithbat-e Wuj‘d-e Khud* (Proving the Existence of God) written by 40 scholars, trans. Ahmad ‘r‘m, pp. 18–19.

11. Bertrand Russell (1872 – 1970): a British philosopher, mathematician and man of letters. Initially a subscriber of idealism, he broke away in 1898 and eventually became an empiricist. His works include *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903), *Principia Mathematica* (3 vols., 1910–1913) in collaboration with A.N. Whitehead, *Marriage and Morals* (1929), *Education and the Social Order* (1932), *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (1940), *History of Western Philosophy* (1945),

and popularizations such as *The ABC of Relativity* (1925), as well as his *Autobiography* (3 vols., 1967–69). [Trans.]

[12.](#) Bertrand Russell, *Scientific Worldview*, pp. 114–115.

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