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Lesson 6: The Need of the World for One Without Need

The principle of causality is a general and universal law and foundation for all efforts of man, both in the acquisition of knowledge and in his customary activities. The strivings of scholars to uncover the cause of every phenomenon, whether natural or social, arise from the belief that no phenomenon originates in and of itself without the intervention of causes and agents.

The researches of thinkers throughout the world have given them the ability to know better the powerful order of nature; the farther they advance on the path of knowledge, the more devoted they are to the principle of causality. The link between cause and effect and the principle that no phenomenon will set foot on the plain of being without a cause, are among the strongest deductions ever made by man and count as indispensable conditions for intellectual activity. They represent something natural and primordial, assimilated automatically by our minds.

Even prehistoric man was inclined to discover the causes of phenomena, and, in fact, philosophers derived the living concept of causality from the very nature and disposition of man before they placed it in a philosophical mould. Imprisoned as we are within the four walls of matter, we never encounter anything accidental in life, and, indeed, no one ever encountered, in the history of the world, an accident not arising from a cause.

Were this not the case, we might have an excuse for regarding the universe as accidental in origin. What kind of accident might it be that from the dawn of being to the present has guided the infinite interactions of all things, in so wondrous, precise and orderly a fashion? Can the order we perceive be the reflection of mere accident and happenstance?

Any supposable phenomenon in the universe was submerged in the darkness of non-being before it assumed the form of being. It cannot pierce the darkness of non-being and step forth on the plain of

being as an existent thing until the powerful hand of causality sets to work.

The relationship between cause and effect is the relationship between two existing things, in the sense that the existence of one of them is dependent on the existence of the other. Every effect has a relationship of affinity and harmony with its cause, since the effect draws its existence from the cause. This specific relationship cannot be destroyed or replaced by another.

Whenever you consider the quiddity of a thing that has an identical relationship to being and non-being, neither of them being rationally essential for it, that thing is technically designated as "contingent," in the sense that there is nothing within its essence necessitating either being or non-being. If a thing in its own essence requires its own non-being, then its existence is impossible.

Finally, if being emerges from within the essence of a thing in such a way that reason cannot regard it as dependent on anything else, the existence of that thing is designated as necessary. It is an independent being, free of all need and subsisting by means of its own essence; its existence is the source of all other beings, while it is not subject itself to any need or condition.

It should be added that material existence cannot in any way acquire the attribute "necessary," because the existence of any compounded material entity is conditional on the existence of the parts that comprise it; it is dependent on its own parts both for its origin and for its survival.

Matter has different aspects and dimensions; it is immersed in quantity and multiplicity; and it acquires its various dimensions by means of attributes and properties. The necessary being, by contrast, is free of all such properties.

All the phenomena that once did not exist and then came into being once possessed abstract notions of being and non-being. When they hastened toward the point of being, this was as a result of a cause that impelled them in that direction. It was an impulsion, an external factor, that drove them in one direction instead of the other. In other words, the existence of a cause was the agent of being, just as the non-existence or absence of a cause is the agent of non-being.

Of course, a phenomenon that comes into being as the result of the existence of a cause never loses its essential neediness; it will always remain a being characterized by need. For this reason, the need of a phenomenon for a cause is permanent and indissoluble; its relationship with the cause will never be severed for an instant.

Were the relationship to be severed, the existence of the phenomenon would immediately yield to non-existence, in just the same way that the very instant an electricity generator stops working, all the bright lamps connected to it fall dark. It is for this reason that cause and effect, freedom from need and subjection to need, are in constant relationship with each other; were the relationship to be severed

nothing would remain but darkness and non-being.

Thus, no phenomenon becomes manifest in the world until a certain power is bestowed on it by one whose essence is free from need and is itself the very source from which being gushes forth. Were being inherent in the essences of phenomena, they would never follow the path of cessation and non-being.

But it is neediness that is inherent in their essences, so that even after their being is established in the order of creation, their attribute of neediness continues under all circumstances. They are never free of need for a cause; it is impossible that an effect should enjoy existence independently or continue to exist for a single instant without relying on a cause.

It thus becomes apparent to us that all phenomena—all contingent beings—derive at all times and in every instant from an infinite essence that bestows being—i.e., the Necessary Being, the Unique and Almighty Creator—the power and sustenance that permit them to come into being and remain in being. The Noble Qur'an says:

"He it is Who from the plenitude of His essence has bestowed on us the capital of being." (53:48)

"O mankind, you are in need of your Lord; it is only His unique essence that is free of need and worthy of praise." (35:15)

Let us pay heed, too, to this Qur'anic summons:

"Do they imagine that they've been created without any cause, or do they suppose that they are their own creators?" (52:36)

"Have they created the heavens and the earth ? They have no certain belief in what they say" (52:37)

Do they have a Lord other than God? No, it is not so; God is exalted above the partners they ascribe to him." (52:43)

"Glorified be He in Whose hand is all sovereignty and Who has power over all things." (67:1)

The Source of All Being is Free of Need for a Cause

The followers of materialism pay much critical attention to the principle that God does not stand in need of a cause. They say if we suppose the Creator to be the origin of the world and the one who bestows existence upon it, all phenomena deriving their origination and continued existence from him, what cause has freed him of need for having a creator; what agent has caused him to come into being?

In a lecture given to the London Atheist Society, the well known writer, Bertrand Russell, said: "One day,

when I was eighteen years of age, I was reading the autobiography of John Stuart Mill. One sentence in particular caught my attention: Mill wrote that one day he asked his father who had brought him into existence, and his father had been unable to answer." The reason for this was that he immediately posed the question: who brought God into being?

Russell then adds: "I am still convinced that that simple sentence exposes the sophistry of the primary cause. For if everything must have a reason and cause, the same must apply to the existence of God. If, on the contrary, something can exist without reason or cause, that thing might be either God or the world, and the whole discussion becomes meaningless."[1](#)

Unfortunately, certain Western philosophers who accept the existence of God have been unable to solve this problem. The English philosopher Herbert Spencer has said the following in this connection: "The problem is that, on the one hand, human reason seeks a cause for everything and, on the other, refuses all circularity. It neither perceives nor comprehends an uncaused cause. When the priest tells a child that God has created the world, the child asks who has created God."[2](#)

Elsewhere he says: "The materialist tries to convince himself of a world that exists in and of itself, eternally and without cause. However, we cannot believe in something that has neither beginning nor cause. The theologian takes matters one step further back by saying that God created the world. But the child asks him the unanswerable question: who created God?"[3](#)

We can raise precisely the same objection against the materialists and ask them, "If we follow the chain of causality back, we will ultimately reach the primary cause. Let us say that cause is not God, but matter. Tell us who created primary matter. You who believe in the law of causality, answer us: if matter is the ultimate cause of all things, what is the cause of matter? You say that the source of all phenomena is matter–energy; what is the cause and origin of matter–energy?"

Since the chain of causality cannot recede into infinity, they can answer only that matter is an eternal and timeless entity for which no beginning can be posited: matter is non–created, has no beginning or end, and its being arises from within its own nature.

This means that the materialists accept the principle of eternity and non–origination; they believe that all things arose out of eternal matter and that being arises from within the very nature of matter, without any need for a creator.

Russell openly states this belief in the lecture quoted above. He says: "There is no proof that the world ever had a beginning. The idea that things must once have had a beginning results from the poverty of our imagination."[4](#)

In just the same way that Russell regards matter as eternal, believers in God attribute eternity to God. Belief in an eternal being is then common to materialist and religious philosophers: both groups agree that there is a primary cause, but believers in God regard the primary cause as wise, all–knowing, and

possessing the power of decision and will, whereas in the view of the materialists, the primary cause has neither consciousness, intelligence, perception, nor the power of decision. Thus, the removal of God in no way solves the problem posed by eternal being.

Moreover, matter is the locus for motion and change, and its motion is dynamic and situated within its own essence. Now, essential motion is incompatible with eternity, and matter and essential stability are two mutually exclusive categories that cannot be fused in a single locus. Whatever is stable and immutable in its essence cannot accept movement and change within that essence.

How do Marxists, who believe that matter is accompanied by its antithesis, justify the eternity of matter? Eternity means stability and immutability of essence, the impossibility of cessation, but matter is in its essence a compendium of forces and potentialities; it is relativity itself, totally caught up in living and dying.

Eternity is incompatible with the mode of being possessed by matter and the factors and attributes necessitated by its nature. The belief of those who have faith in God concerning a fixed and absolute principle relates to a being who in and of his nature can accept stability and absoluteness; his nature is completely devoid of and remote from the properties of matter. The very nature of matter refuses permanence, eternity and continuity, for it can never separate itself from movement, relativity, and it stands in opposition to being a prime or absolute agent.

It will be useful here to relate the discussion of Imam as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace, with one of the materialists of his age. The materialist: "Out of what were beings created?"

The Imam: "They were created out of nothing (i.e., they were originally non-beings)."

The materialist: "How do they grow and emerge from nonbeing?"

The Imam: "Did I not say that all things in the world were created out of nothing? My purport is this, that all beings were originally non-beings; they were non-existent, and then they became existent. You wish to say that the world is eternal, but this notion is incorrect for the following reasons:

"First, if the material world is eternal, it follows that an eternal being should be subject to change and cessation, which is impossible.

"Second, if the elements comprising the world are eternal by virtue of their essence, how is it possible that they should enter the embrace of death and disappearance? And if, conversely, they lack life in their essences, how can life surge forth from them?

"If you say that living beings emerge from living elements and inanimate beings from inanimate elements, we reply that an essence that lacks life in and of itself cannot be eternal and cannot be the source for life."

The materialist: "If matter is as you say, why are beings said to be eternal?"

The Imam: "Belief in the eternity of the universe is held by those who deny the existence of a ruler and planner of creation, reject the messengers of God, regard the books they bring as the fables of the ancients, and concoct beliefs pleasing to themselves."[5](#)

We say, then, that the existence of a thing is not possible without a cause of a deficient thing, that is, whose fate is in the hands of its cause and whose permanence is dependent on the existence of its cause. This does not apply to a being that is conscious of its reality and exhibits no trace of defect and limitation.

The primary cause is the primary cause by virtue of possessing perfect and unlimited being; not being subject to any agent, it is free from need, condition and dependency, and it contains no trace of mutability or change.

When we speak of the first cause and simultaneously assert that God is free of all need for a cause, we do not mean that He generally shares with created beings the need for a cause but was once, as it were, granted an exemption from the law of causality. God is not an effect in order that He might need a cause; He is not a phenomenon in order that He might need a creator. On the contrary, all manifestations and phenomena of being derive from Him, the eternal source of being. The law of causality applies uniquely to the sphere of those things whose non-existence preceded their existence.

Similarly, the meaning of the first cause is not that God originated Himself, that He was His own cause. The need of the effect for the cause lies in the type of existence that the former possesses; it exists not because it is essentially existent but as a result of the derivative and dependent existence it acquires from the cause. But a being whose nature is subject to no condition and exhibits a complete absence of dependence and connection is totally removed from the sphere in which the law of causality operates.

If a being, by virtue of the perfection and freedom from need of its essence, stands in no need of a cause, it follows that no cause has fixed it at a given degree of being and that no cause can intervene in it.

The chain of causality cannot be extended indefinitely backwards, and an absence of connection is inherent in the very concept of the first cause. The question, "Whence did the first cause arise?" does not, therefore, arise; questions such as this apply only to the origins of phenomena and their dependency.

The existence of the first cause is identical with its essence; its being the first cause is, indeed, also identical with its essence. Both these properties imply freedom from need, whereas things whose existence is borrowed stand in need of a cause, because they are characterized by transformation and

change, by emergence from non-existence and entry into existence.

How can it be supposed that belief in the existence of God is the acceptance of contradiction, whereas belief in the uncaused nature of an effect such as matter is not contradictory?

We live in a world where all things are exposed to change and destruction; there is the mark of impermanence, subjection and indebtedness imprinted on each one of its particles. Need and dependence are firmly rooted in the depths of our being and that of everything on earth and in heaven. Our existence is not eternal and has not emerged from within our own essence; we were not, and then we were clothed in the garb of existence and came into being. In order to come into being, creatures such as us must beseechingly reach out to the Bestower of existence.

But He Who is eternal and everlasting, Whose existence emerges from within His own essence, and Whose appearance is outside of time, manifestly has no need of a cause.

The meaning of a cause in philosophy is that which brings forth an effect from non-existence into existence and cloths it in the garb of existence. This creativity cannot be posited for material causes, and the only role of matter is to abandon one form in order to become receptive to another.

It is true that every material being acquires each instant a new and different character as a result of internal development. However, the innate motion of the world and the processes of generation and corruption proclaim a lasting need for a hand to that Who creates the motion, a hand that both nurtures the swift caravan of being and impels it forward.

- [1.](#) Russell, Why I am not a Christian, p. 9.
- [2.](#) Quoted in Furughi, Sayr-i-Hikmat dar Urupa, III, p. 162.
- [3.](#) Will Durant, History of Philosophy, II, p. 497.
- [4.](#) Russel, Why I am not a Christian, p. 20.
- [5.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, I, p. 166.

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