The Causes Responsible for Materialist tendencies in the West (3 of 4)

Causes Responsible for Materialist tendencies in the West (3 of 4)

Murtadha Mutahhari

Translated by
Mujahid Husayn

Al-Islam.org

Al-Tawhid Vol.12, Vol.13

Authors(s):

Murtadha Mutahhari [1]

Publisher(s):

al-Tawhid Islamic Journal [2]

Translator(s):

Mujahid Husayn [3]

What is materialism? Is man materialistic by nature? Materialism in history, in Islam, and in Christianity.

Get PDF [4] Get EPUB [5] Get MOBI [6]

Topic Tags:

Materialism [7]
Human [8]
History [9]
Islam [10]
Christianity [11]

The Causes Responsible for Materialist tendencies in the West, Part 3 of 4

Translated from the Persian by Mujahid Husayn
Martyr Murtadha Mutahhari

Eternity of Matter

Another example of the inadequacy of Western philosophy is to imagine the concept of eternity of matter to be incompatible with faith in God, while in fact there is no such logical implication between this view and denial of God. Rather the divine philosophers believe that faith in God necessarily implies faith in His eternity and continuous creativity (fayyadiyyat), and it is the continuity of His creativity that implies the eternity of creation.

A Russian scholar had written in an article whose Persian translation was published by a magazine few

years ago that Ibn Sina vacillated between materialism and idealism.

Why did this scholar express such a view concerning Ibn Sina while one of Ibn Sina's hallmarks is that he has consistently followed a single line in expressing his views and doctrines and there is no wavering and contradiction in his statements. Maybe his powerful and extraordinary memory which made it possible for him not to forget any of his thoughts was one of the causes of this characteristic.

This Russian scholar, since he saw on the one hand that Ibn Sina believed in the eternity of matter and did not believe that time had a beginning, thought him to be a materialist. On the other hand, he found him speaking of God, creation and the First Cause and concluded that Ibn Sina is an idealist. Hence Ibn Sina kept wavering between the two poles of materialism and idealism and had no fixed opinion in this regard.

This Russian scholar had such a view about Ibn Sina because he considered the concept of eternity of matter to be incompatible with the idea that matter and the universe were of Divine creation.

However in Ibn Sina's reasoning, where he has discussed the 'criterion for dependence upon a cause' and identified it to be 'essential contingency' (imkan al-dhati), there exists no such contradiction between these two. Earlier we have discussed the topic of criterion for dependence upon a cause, which happens to be one of the most important of philosophical issues and has been only dealt in Islamic philosophy.

It was made clear that the logical implication of being caused and created is not coming into existence in time (huduth al-zamani); there is nothing to stop an existent from having an eternal and everlasting existence while deriving its existence from a being other than itself. We will have more to say on this issue later on.

God or Freedom?

Predetermination and freedom of will (jabr wa ikhtiyar) is a well-known issue of philosophy, theology and ethics. The discussion is about whether man is compelled in his actions and has no freedom of choice, or is free in his actions. There is another issue discussed in metaphysics which is named qada wa qadar' (Divine ordainments and determinations). Qada' and qadar implies the decisive Divine command which determines the course of the world's events and their limits and extent.

The topic of qada and qadar involves the question whether Divine qada' and qadar is general and covers all things and events or not. In the case of its being general, what is the position of human freedom and free will? Is it possible for Divine qada and qadar to be general and all-inclusive and for man to have a free role at the same time?

The answer is, yes. I have myself discussed this topic in a treatise written on this subject and published under the title “Man and Destiny” (Insan wa sarnawisht) and have proved that there is no incompatibility between God's general qada' on the one hand and man's freedom of will on the other. Of course, that

which I have mentioned therein is not something which has been said for the first time by me; whatever I have said is inferred from the Noble Qur'an and others before me have done the same, especially Islamic philosophers, who have adequately discussed this topic.

But today when we look at Europe we find persons like Jean Paul Sartre lost in the labyrinths of this issue, and since they have based their philosophy on choice, freewill and freedom, they do not want to accept God. Jean Paul Sartre says: Since I believe and have faith in freedom I cannot believe and have faith in God, for if I accept God I will necessarily have to accept fate, and if I accept fate I cannot accept individual freedom, and since I want to accept freedom and I love it and have faith in it, I cannot have faith in God.

From the Islamic point of view, faith and belief in God is equivalent to man's freedom and freewill. Freedom in the real sense is the essence of man. Although the Noble Qur'an introduces God as very great and His will as all– pervasive, it also strongly defends human freedom.

"There has certainly come on man a period of time when he was nothing worthy of mention. We created man of a mingled sperm so as to try him; and We made him hearing and seeing. Surely We guided him upon the way, whether he be thankful or unthankful." (76:1–3)

This implies that man is free, and he may choose the right path or the path of ingratitude (kufran) of his own will.

The Qur'an further states:

"Whosoever desires this present world, We hasten for him therein what We will unto whomsoever We desire; then We appoint for him the hell wherein he shall roast, condemned and rejected. And whosoever desires the world to come and strives after it as he should, being a believer, those, their striving shall be thanked. Each We succour, these and those, from thy Lord's gift; and thy Lords gift is not confined." (17:18–20).

Yes, this is the Qur'anic logic. The Qur'an does not see any incompatibility between God's general qada and man's freedom and freewill.

From the philosophical point of view, too, conclusive proofs which negate any incompatibility between the two have been provided.

However, these philosophers of the twentieth century have imagined that they can be free only if they do not accept God, and that too in the sense that they can in that case break the relation of their will from the past and the present, that is with history and the environment, and with a will severed from history and society choose and build the future, although the issue of determinism and freewill is not related to the question of acceptance or negation of God.

By accepting God, too, it is possible to envisage an active and free role for the human will, as it is also

possible to negate God and at the same time to challenge the concept of freewill on the basis of the universal law of causation. That is, the root of determinism, or the imagined implication of determinism, lies in the belief in a definite system of cause and effect acknowledged both by the theists as well as the materialists.

If there is no incompatibility between a definite system of cause and effect and human freedom and freewill, which in fact there is not, belief in God, too, does not entail negation of freewill. For more details on this issue refer to the book Insan wa sarnawisht. Here we intend to mention a few more examples of the philosophical errors of the West in the field of metaphysics.

Chance, God, or Causation?

For a better understanding of Western thought, both theist and materialist, concerning God, it is proper that we discuss the following topic:

Some imagine that proving God's existence depends on casting doubt on the law of causation and the concept of causal necessity, that is the very thing which constitutes the most basic foundation for proving God's existence. Not only is it the basic foundation for proving God's existence but also the foundation for accepting any scientific and philosophical theory.

Bertrand Russell has assigned a chapter in his book The Scientific Outlook under the heading “Science and Religion.” He has posed in this chapter certain issues which in his opinion form the area of conflict between science and religion. One of them is this very issue which he discusses under the heading of “Free Will.”

The reason he has mentioned it under this heading is that the Westerners imagine freewill and freedom in the human context to imply freedom from the law of causality and causal necessity. Therefore, if we reject the laws of causation and causal necessity in nature, we will be admitting to the presence of some kind of choice in nature. Accordingly Russell raises this issue under the heading “Free Will.”

In our opinion, the raising of this issue under this caption is by itself another indication of the level of Western thought on such kind of topics. In any case this is what Russell says:

Until very recent times theology, while in its Catholic form it admitted free will in human beings, showed an affection for natural law in the universe, tempered only by belief in occasional miracles ...

One of the most remarkable developments in religious apologetics in recent times is the attempt to rescue free will in man by means of ignorance as to the behaviour of atoms ... It is not yet known with any certainty whether there are laws governing the behaviour of single atoms in all respects, or whether the behaviour of such atoms is in part random ... In the atom there are various possible states which do not merge continuously into each other, but are separated by small finite gaps.

An atom may hop from one of these states to another, and there are various different hops that it may make. At present no laws are known to decide which of the possible hops will take place on any given occasion, and it is suggested that the atom is not subject to laws at all in this respect, but has what might be called, by analogy, “free will.” Eddington, in his book on the Nature of the Physical World, has made great play with this possibility.[1]

Russell then goes on to given an outline of the history of the principle of non-necessity and adds:

I am surprised, I repeat, that Eddington should have appealed to this principle in connexion with the question of free will, for the principle does nothing whatever to show that the course of nature is not determined.[2]

Then he states that that which is understood from quantum mechanics is not the negation of causality but the negation of the principle of necessity (principle of the necessity of an effect's dependence upon a cause). He says:

There is nothing whatever in the Principle of Indeterminacy to show that any physical event is uncaused ... Returning now to the atom and its supposed free will, it should be observed that it is not known that the behaviour of the atom is capricious.

It is false to say the behaviour of the atom is known to be capricious, and it is also false to say the behaviour is known to be not capricious. Science has quite recently discovered that the atom is not subject to the laws of the older physics, and some physicists have somewhat rashly jumped to the conclusion that the atom is not subject to law at all ... It is very rash to erect a theological superstructure upon a piece of ignorance which may be only momentary.

There is, moreover, a purely empirical objection to the belief in free will. Wherever it has been possible to subject the behaviour of animals or of human beings to careful scientific observation, it has been found, as in Pavlov's experiments, that scientific laws are just as discoverable here as in any other sphere. It is true that we cannot predict human actions with any completeness, but this is quite sufficiently accounted for by the complication of the mechanism, and by no means demands the hypothesis of complete lawlessness, which is found to be false wherever it can be carefully tested.

Those who desire caprice in the physical world seem to me to have failed to realize what this would involve. All inference in regard to the course of nature is causal, and if nature is not subject to causal laws all such inference must fail. We cannot, in that case, know anything outside of our personal experience; indeed, strictly speaking, we can only know our experience in the present moment, since all memory depends upon casual laws. If we cannot infer the existence of other people, or even of our own past, how much less can we infer God, or anything else that the theologians desire ...

There is, in fact, no good reason whatever for supposing that the behaviour of atoms is not subject to law. It is only quite recently that experimental methods have been able to throw any light on the behavior

of individual atoms, and it is no wonder if the laws of this behaviour have not yet been discovered.[3]

We endorse Russell's opinion that a satisfactory proof has not been provided to prove the lawlessness of atomic movements, and further contend that it is impossible that such a proof exist or be produced in the future. Similarly, we affirm his view that if the law of causation were not valid and the universe were lawless, all our inferences about the universe, God, and everything else would be in vain.

That which Russell has said in answer to those who claim the universe to be lawless (or lawless at least in subatomic particles) is the same as what Islamic philosophers have said in reply to the Ash'arites who tried to deny causal necessity. I have expressed my view about this principle in the footnotes of “The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism” and in the book 'Man and Destiny'.

But here I cannot refrain from expressing my surprise at the following two points. The first that a group of so-called theists have tried to prove the existence of God by negating causation, or in their own words, through freewill and negation of causal necessity and congruence between cause and effect (i.e. the notion that a certain cause can produce only a certain kind of effect). Anyone even with little acquaintance with Islamic metaphysics knows that acceptance of the principle of causation and causal necessity and congruence between cause and effect is part of the ABC of Islamic metaphysics.

The second point is that Mr. Russell imagines that the only blow delivered to science by the negation of the law of causality is our inability to generalize the results of scientific experiments, for the generalization of an experiment is dependent upon the theory that 'like causes in like circumstances act in a similar manner.'

He is unaware of the fact that by negating the principle of causation, even in cases where all aspects of a thing have been experimented we cannot acquire the knowledge of it within the experimented limits, because our knowledge of external reality acquired through the senses and experimentation is itself dependent upon the law of causation. If the law of causation were not there, we would arrive at nothing. Mr. Russell repeatedly emphasizes this point in his book The Scientific Outlook that modern physics is advancing towards the concept of lawlessness of the universe.

The basic point is that the law of causation is not a physical law but a law of philosophy; consequently physics can neither prove it nor refute it. But Mr. Russell does not believe in philosophical laws independent of the achievements of the sciences and is therefore forced to remain bewildered in this quagmire.

In the footnotes of 'The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism' in the article, “The Origins of Multiplicity in Cognition,” I have discussed the source of the concept of causality and the manner in which the mind arrives at this concept and affirms its validity. The reader is referred to that book.

The Concept of Creation

Among the confusions present in Western philosophical thought concerning the problem of causation is the analysis of the concept of creation. What is meant by creation? Does it mean that the Creator gives existence to a non-existent? Or does it imply that He brings an existent into existence? None of the two alternatives is rational and a third alternative is also unimaginable.

In other words, that which is created by a power either exists or is non-existent. If it exists, creating it amounts to 'acquiring the acquired' (tahsil al-hasil), because creating what exists implies giving a thing something which it already possesses, like a straightening a straight line. And if it is non-existent, creating it amounts to kind of a contradiction, because creating a non-existent implies changing non-existence into existence, and this involves the conversion of non-existence into existence and non-being into being, and this is a contradiction.

Hence creation is either the changing of existence into existence or the changing of non-existence into existence. The former involves acquiring the acquired and while the latter results in a contradiction, and both are impossible. This is the well-known paradox in this regard. Among Islamic scholars, the one to develop this paradox more than anyone else is Imam Fakhr al-Din Razi.

Islamic philosophers have devoted a separate chapter to this issue, known as the 'problem of making' (mas'alah-ye ja'l) and have provided an excellent and precise analysis of the concepts of causation, creation, and the like, thereby resolving this paradox.

First, they have demonstrated that if this argument were correct we will have to set aside completely the notion of causation regardless of whether it is natural causation-that is, bringing about motion and changing a thing into something else, or Divine causation-that is, generation and creation.

Secondly, they have established that there are two possible kinds of causation and making (ja'l). One of them is simple making (ja'l al-basit) and the other compound making (ja'l al-murakkab). All those paradoxes have risen because all instances of creation and causation have been imagined as belonging to the class of compound making and causation.

Here we do not intend to study this problem which needs an elaborate treatment, and to discuss all its various aspects will greatly prolong this discussion. Here our sole purpose is to point out the causes responsible for materialist tendencies from the viewpoint of the West's philosophical inadequacies, and so we are forced to discuss this issue to the extent necessary to reveal one of the roots of these tendencies.

One of these roots pertains to the remaining unsolved of the concept of creation, or in other words, the absence of an accurate analysis of the concept of causation, which has taken place in Islamic philosophy in the well-known discussion on ja'l.

Here I will again cite Russell in this regard in his capacity as a materialist Western philosopher. In the aforementioned book and chapter, Bertrand Russell has discussed a topic under the heading “God the Creator.” There he has mentioned the famous theory of modern physics based on the world's gradual disintegration and running down and hence having a end.

This in turn proves that the world has a beginning from the point of view of time, because that which has no beginning has no end, and that which has an end must have a beginning, although it is possible that a thing may have a beginning without having an end. From here it has been concluded that the world has been created by a power and that the view of the materialists is wrong.

Russell, while trying to explain that this new theory does not corroborate the theist thesis, says:

One of the most serious difficulties confronting science at the present time is the difficulty derived from the fact that the universe appears to be running down. There are, for example, radio-active elements in the world. These are perpetually disintegrating into less complex elements, and no process by which they can be built up is known.

This, however, is not the most important or difficult respect in which the world is running down. Although we do not know of any natural process by which complex elements are built up out of simpler ones, we can imagine such processes, and it is possible that they are taking place somewhere. But when we come to the second law of thermodynamics we encounter a more fundamental difficulty.

The second law of thermodynamics states, roughly speaking, that things left to themselves tend to get into a muddle and do not tidy themselves up again. It seems that once upon a time the universe was all tidy, with everything in its proper place, and that ever since then it has been growing more and more disorderly, until nothing but a drastic spring-cleaning can restore it to its pristine order.[4]

Russell, after giving clarifications in this regard, goes on with his explanation:

As we trace the course of the world backwards in time, we arrive after some finite number of years (rather more than four thousand and four, however), at a state of the world which could not have been preceded by any other, if the second law of thermodynamics was then valid. This initial state of the world would be that in which energy was distributed as unevenly as possible.[5]

Then he goes on to quote Eddington and speaks about his hesitation and bewilderment concerning which theory should be eventually chosen. Eddington says:

The difficulty of an infinite past is appalling. It is inconceivable that we are the heirs of an infinite time of preparation; it is not less inconceivable that there was once a moment with no moment preceding it.[6]

Finally Russell himself expresses his opinion in this manner

The second law of thermodynamics may not hold in all times and places, or we may be mistaken in

thinking the universe spatially finite; but as arguments of this nature go, it is a good one, and I think we ought provisionally to accept the hypothesis that the world had a beginning at some definite, though unknown, date. Are we to infer from this that the world was made by a Creator? Certainly not, if we are to adhere to the canons of valid scientific inference.

There is no reason whatever why the universe should not have begun spontaneously, except that it seems odd that it should do so; but there is no law of nature to the effect that things which seem odd to us must not happen.

To infer a Creator is to infer a cause, and causal inferences are only admissible in science when they proceed from observed causal laws. Creation out of nothing is an occurrence which has not been observed. 7 There is, therefore, no better reason to suppose that the world was caused by a Creator than to suppose that it was uncaused; either equally contradicts the causal laws that we can observe.8

That which has been quoted consists of two parts. The first is about modern physics, and expressing any opinion about it is outside the competence of metaphysics. From the metaphysical viewpoint, creation cannot be limited and have a beginning in time. Similarly it cannot stop at a particular limit. Divine effusion is interminable and infinite with respect to both its beginning and end.

The present universe as conceived by physics could be a single link in the chain of Divine effusion which comprises of numerous inter-connected links, but it cannot be the only link. From the standpoint of metaphysics, the meaning of the statement that the universe came into existence in finite time is that this part of creation has a beginning in time, not that the process of creation itself began in finite time.

The second part consists of the philosophical ideas of this twentieth century philosopher. The real purpose of our citing the above-mentioned passages was for the sake of this part. Now that modern physics affirms the theory of gradual disintegration and running down of the universe, he prefers to accept that the universe came into being at a finite though unknown point in time.

And now that we are compelled to accept that the universe began in finite time, there are two possibilities: first that the universe was brought into existence by a creator at the point of its beginning, the other is that it came into existence spontaneously at that point without the interference of any agent.

He claims that from the point of view of causal laws there can be no preference of any kind between the two possibilities considering; both equally contradict causal laws. The coming into existence of the universe as an act of a creative power is also against causal laws because the causal laws which we are able to observe only justify conclusions which follow from the principle of causation. That is, it recognizes causality and being caused (ma'luliyyat) only in cases where the cause itself is in turn an effect of another cause. But if a cause and effect are assumed where the cause itself is not an effect, this contradicts the principle of causality recognized by science.

If a cause and effect are assumed wherein the cause in its turn is not an effect of another cause this

implies that creation has taken place from non- existence, and creation from non-existence is impossible by experience.

Firstly, Mr. Russell imagines that the law of causation belongs to the category of observable and sensible things. He has not paid attention, or has not wished to do so, that causality is not something based on the sense perception. That which is perceived is succession of events and not causality, nor the general laws of cause and effect. Rather, even succession and sequence are also not perceived by the senses but are inferred and abstracted.

Secondly, he says that the law of cause and effect only endorses such causation in which the cause is in turn an effect of another cause, and the idea of a causation wherein the cause is not an effect of another cause contradicts the law of causation.

We ask, 'Why'? Suppose we even consider the law of causation to be an empirical law; where is such a limitation in this law? Does our notion of causation imply anything except this that every phenomenon needs an agent to bring it into existence? But what experiment leads us to conclude that this agent itself must be something which has come into existence with the help of another agent, and similarly the latter agent, and so on ad infinitum?

Thirdly, what is meant by saying that 'observation shows that creation from nothing is impossible'? Are necessity and impossibility empirical concepts? Is impossibility or necessity a phenomenon and a physical condition susceptible to experimentation and perceivable by the senses? At the most that which can be said is that creation from nothing has not been empirically observed, but what is meant by the statement that its impossibility has been empirically proved?

Fourthly, what is the difference between a causation wherein the cause is itself an effect of another cause and a causation in which the cause is not an effect of another cause so as to conclude that in the former instance creation is not from non-being while in the latter it amounts to creation from nothing? In both the cases there is a a being dependent upon another being and originating from another existent. If creation has taken place from nothing, it has done so in both the cases, and if it has not taken place from nothing it has not done so in both the cases.

Fifthly, according to this philosopher, in any case modern physics has declared the law of causation to have exceptions, because this physics compels us to accept a starting point for the universe and there are no more than two possibilities for the origin of the universe, and both the possibilities violate the law of causation with equal force.

Therefore, we must accept that all our inferences concerning nature and the universe are invalid, because earlier Mr. Russell has himself conceded that all inferences derived by us concerning nature are founded upon the law of causation, and if nature is not subject to law these inferences in their entirety would be unreliable.

The realm of nature is either subject to the law of causation or it is not If it is, then its coming into existence must also be subject to the law of causation; if it is not, it is not possible that nature should come into existence in an arbitrary manner and then become orderly.

The following words of Russell are just as true of himself. He says:

The principle of causality may be true or may be false, but the person who finds the hypothesis of its falsity cheering is failing to realize the implications of his own theory. He usually retains unchallenged all those causal laws which he finds convenient, as, for example, that his food will nourish him and that his bank will honor his cheques so long as his account is in funds, while rejecting all those that he finds inconvenient. This, however, is altogether too naive a procedure.9

It appears that these remarks are more true of Mr. Russell than anyone else. What we have observed concerning Mr. Russell's approach to the subject of God is that it is not logic and reasoning that have led him to deny God. Instead a kind of disinclination or rather a negative prejudice is apparent in him. An elaborate psychological analysis of his is required to disclose the source of this disinclination. The metaphysics and the knowledge of the supernatural which he acquired during childhood from his grandmother which he repeatedly mentions in his works, should not be ignored in this psychological analysis

Argument from Design

The simplest and the most popular argument provided for the existence of God is the argument from design. The Noble Qur'an refers to the world's existents as 'ayat,' that is, signs of God. It is generally said that the presence of design and order in things is a proof of the existence of an ordering power.

Unlike other arguments such as the argument of the First Mover, the argument of necessity and contingency (burhan al-wujub wa imkan), the argument of coming into existence and eternity (burhan al-huduth wa qidam), and the argument of the Truthful (burhan al-siddiqin), which are essentially philosophical, theological and rational, this argument is a natural and essentially empirical argument.

It resembles all other arguments and proofs which are products of man's experience.

In the West, David Hume, the eighteenth-century English philosopher, cast doubts upon this argument and since then to our present times many Westerners believe that the argument from design, which is the greatest support of the theists, has lost its credibility. The loss of credibility of the arguments for God's existence, especially the argument from design, is one of the causes responsible for materialist tendencies in the West. Now we will examine the criticism of Mr. Hume.

Hume has written a book by the name Dialogues concerning Natural Religion in which a fictitious person named Cleanthes defends the argument from design while another fictitious character called Philo attacks it, and in this manner a dialogue takes place between the two. Although Hume himself is not a

materialist, he tries to prove that the argument presented by the theists do not have a scientific basis, and that the same is true of the arguments of the materialists. He believes that faith is a matter of the heart, and if the argument from design is adopted as a rational criterion, it can be only said that:

The order in nature, in spite of all that has been said, suggests, if it does not Prove “That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence.” Beyond this, we have no way to extend the argument in order to establish anything about the characteristics of this cause or these causes.[10]

Hume himself is philosophically a skeptic and an agnostic, but he insists on proving that the argument from design is incomplete, or rather untenable. It is said about him that:

All his life, David Hume was concerned with the merits of various arguments which purported to establish the existence of a Divine Being. In his early notebooks and letters, he continually reflected about the problem, pointing out flaws or fallacies involved in the arguments of various religious writers. In various works, Hume made some incisive criticism of the reasoning employed by some of the religious philosophers.

Possibly because of its currency in his day, one of his major undertakings was a thoroughgoing critique of the argument from design. He worked on this, off and on, for about twenty–five years, perfecting his famous Dialogues concerning Natural Religion.[11]

Hume states the argument from design in Cleanthes words in the following manner:

Look around the world, contemplate the whole and every part of it, you will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy which ravishes into admiration all men who have ever contemplated them.

The curious adaptation of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance of human design, thought, wisdom and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble, and that the Author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work which he has executed. By this argument a posteriori, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a Deity and his similarity to human mind and intelligence.[12]

Hume, speaking through Philo the skeptic, refutes Cleanthes argument in the following words:

If we see a house, Cleanthes, we conclude, with the greatest certainty, that it had an architect or builder because this is precisely that species of effect which we have experienced to proceed from that species

of cause. But surely you, will not affirm that the universe bears such a resemblance to a house that we can with the same certainty infer a similar cause, or that the analogy is here entire and perfect. The dissimilitude is so striking that the utmost you can here pretend to is a guess, a conjecture, a presumption concerning a similar cause.

For aught we can know a priori, matter may contain the source or spring of order originally within itself, as well as mind does; and there is no more difficulty in conceiving that the several elements, form an internal unknown cause, may fall into the most exquisite arrangement, than to conceive that their ideas, in the great universal mind, from a like internal unknown cause, fall into that arrangement.

And will any man tell me with a serious countenance that an orderly universe must arise from some thought and art like the human because we have experience of it? To ascertain this reasoning it were requisite that we had experience of the origin of worlds; and it is not sufficient, surely, that we have seen ships and cities arise from human art and contrivance ....

Can you pretend to show any such similarity between the fabric of a house and the generation of a universe? Have you ever seen nature in any such situation as resembles the first arrangement of the elements? Have worlds ever been formed under your eye, and have you had the leisure to observe the whole progress of the phenomenon, from the first appearance of order to its final consummation? If you have, then cite your experience and deliver your theory ... [13]

Secondly, you have no reason, on your theory, for ascribing perfection to the Deity, even in His finite capacity, or for supposing Him free from every error, mistake, or incoherencies, in His undertakings ... At least, you must acknowledge that it is impossible for us to tell, from our limited views, whether this system contains any great faults or deserves any considerable praise if compared to other possible and even real systems. Could a peasant, if the Aeneid were read to him, pronounce that poem to be absolutely faultless, or even assign to it its proper rank among the productions of human wit, he who had never seen any other production?

But were this world ever so perfect a production, it must still remain uncertain whether all the excellences of the work can justly be ascribed to the workman. If we survey a ship, what an exalted idea we must form of the ingenuity of the carpenter who framed so complicated, useful, and beautiful a machine? And what surprise must we feel when we find him a stupid mechanic who imitated others, and copies an art which, through a long succession of ages, after multiplied trials, mistakes, corrections, deliberations and controversies, had been gradually improving?

Many worlds might have been botched and bungled, throughout an eternity, ere this system was struck out; much labour lost, many fruitless trials made, and a slow but continued improvement carried on during infinite ages in the art of world-making. In such subjects, who can determine where the truth, nay, who can conjecture where the probability lies, amidst a great number of hypotheses which may be proposed, and a still greater which may be imagined? [14]

We have no data to establish any system of cosmogony (a theory about the origins of the universe). Our experience, so imperfect in itself and so limited both in extent and duration, can afford us no probable conjecture concerning the whole of things. But if we must needs fix on some hypothesis, by what rule, pray, ought we to determine our choice? Is there any other rule than the greater similarity of the objects compared? And does not a plant or an animal, which springs from vegetation or generation, bear a stronger resemblance to the world than does any artificial machine, which arises from reason and design? 15

[Hume pointed out that] The analogical reasoning employed in the argument does not provide a basis for any conclusion about the moral attributes of the designer of nature, even if one concludes that there is such a designer. The conception of a moral, just, good, deity does not follow from the comparison of natural and human effects.

If the designer is supposed to be like the human designer, then we would have no reason to suppose that there is any special moral quality belonging to the author of nature. When one examines the product, i.e., nature, and observes all its unpleasant features, e.g., hurricanes, earthquakes, the wars of one part of nature upon another, can we conclude that the planning was that of a just and good intelligence? 16

The summary of the argument from design as stated by Hume is as follows:

a. The argument from design is not a purely rational argument based upon necessary axioms; it is an empirical argument which is derived by natural experience and must therefore fulfill the conditions of empirical proofs.

b. This argument claims that extensive experience of nature shows that a perfect similarity exists between nature and human artifacts such as machines, ships and houses and it becomes evident that the universe is exactly like a big machine from the viewpoint of the relationship of its constituents with one another and the harmony that exists between the structure of the universe and the effects and consequences deriving from it.

c. In accordance with the general principle employed in empirical arguments, the likeness of effects is a proof of the likeness of causes, and considering that human artifacts are the creation of a spirit, mind and thought it follows that the universe too is a creation of a great spirit, intelligence, and thought.

Following is the summary of his criticism of this argument:

a. The basis of the argument, that is, the similarity between the works of nature and human artifacts, is founded upon the idea that the universe, from the viewpoint of the composition of its parts, is like a house or a car whose parts have been assembled by an external intelligent power, mind and spirit, for a series of aims. But this similarity is not complete; that is, it is not certain and definite, only probable. It cannot be said that the resemblance of the universe with a car is greater than the former's resemblance

with a plant or an animal, which has an internal regulating power and is in no way controlled from outside.

b. This would have been an empirical proof if it had been repeatedly experimented with, that is, if worlds had been created repeatedly in the same form and conditions by conscious and humanlike beings, and we had found through experimentation a connection between this kind of effect and a humanlike cause.

After seeing a world resembling the experimented worlds we could rule that this world, too, like those worlds, has a humanlike cause. However, such is not the case. The experience we have of making a ship, house, or a city is not the same as our experience about the world. The origin and formation of the world, which has taken place gradually during billions of years, does not resemble the building of a ship or a house.

c. Furthermore, this argument seeks to prove the existence of God, the Exalted, Who represents ultimate wisdom, infinite power, and absolute perfection. Even if supposedly it is proved that the source of this world is a humanlike being, it is insufficient for the purpose. This argument would have been sufficient for proving the existence of God had we found by experience that this world is the most perfect of possible worlds and conforms to ultimate wisdom.

However, for us who know only this world and have not seen any other to compare and contrast it with our own, it is not possible to understand whether this world has been created on the basis of ultimate wisdom and that it is the best possible world. It is just like asking a villager who has just read one book in his life (even if it is the greatest masterpiece) to declare that the only book he has read is the best book ever written.

d. Supposing that this world is the best possible world and a better world is not possible, even then it will not prove the existence of God, the Exalted, Who (as presumed) is absolute perfection, self-sufficient and the necessary existent, because this argument would be a proof of the existence of God if it proves, over and above that this is the best possible world and a better world is unimaginable, that this is the first world which God has created, that He had no previous experience of creation and has not gradually developed His craftsmanship, and that He has not copied any other creation.

But none of these matters are provable. How can it be ascertained that the world's creator has not imitated another creations? How do we know that He has not been repeatedly experimenting with the technique of world-making since eternity and has gradually achieved this great progress in the craft?

e. Apart from all this, in our present world, we find deficiencies, evil, and ugliness, such as floods, earthquakes, diseases, etc., which do not accord with perfect Divine wisdom.

This was a summary of Hume's criticisms rendered in a relatively Eastern idiom.

Now we may proceed to examine these criticisms:

1. Mr. Hume's idea concerning the argument from design being essentially an empirical argument is mistaken. Empirical arguments are involved in cases where we want to discover the relationship of a particular empirical phenomenon with another empirical phenomenon.

In other words, an empirical argument is valid only when an enquiry concerns discovering the relationship between two natural phenomena, and not when it is meant to discover the relationship between nature and the supernatural. To put it differently, experimentation is possible where we observe a certain phenomenon in nature and want to discover its cause or causes through experimenting, or intend to ascertain the consequences and effects of that phenomenon.

For example, by experimenting we discover the relationship between heating water and its transformation into steam and between its cooling and its transformation into ice. When we see two things taking place one after another and are also certain that nothing else is involved, we conclude that one of the two is the cause of the other. Hence the criterion for an empirical relationship is that both sides of the relationship be observable.

Now let us see whether the argument from design in the world for proving the existence of a conscious designer is an empirical argument or not. But before we examine the nature of the argument from design, it is necessary that we examine the nature of another common argument which Hume regards as totally empirical and considers the argument from design to be somewhat similar to it. This argument involves inferring existence of thought and intellect in man from the artifacts created by man.

Is this common inference of ours regarding persons wherein we discover their intelligence, thought, and level of knowledge by observing their artifacts, in fact an empirical proof of the kind employed in discovering the relationship between natural phenomena, such as the relationship between heat and vaporization or between cooling and freezing? In other words, is the discovery of intelligence, consciousness and knowledge of human creatures from observing their artifacts an empirical inference, or is it a rational inference (burhan al–'aqli)?

How do we know, for example, that Ibn Sina was a philosopher or a physician, or that Sa'di was poet and a writer of taste? How do we, who always come across various friends, teachers, students and classmates, know that one of them is bright, the other dull, another knowledgeable and a fourth ignorant? Obviously from the effects which derive from them, from their speech that we hear, from their behaviour that we observe, and their works and writings which we study.

We cannot directly see or touch their intelligence, minds and knowledge. Basically things such as thought and knowledge are incapable of being sensibly perceived and felt. Supposing that we dissect their brains or take a scan of their contents, we may possibly see certain structures in them, but we cannot observe their thoughts. Rather, we do not have a direct perception of these qualities except what we personally possess of thought, intelligence, and consciousness.

We have a direct access only to our own knowledge, intelligence and thought, and that is all.

Accordingly no intelligence and thought is accessible to us for experimenting so that we may determine the relationship between it and some other factor through experimentation. Rather, from an empirical point of view we are unaware of the existence of any other intelligence or thought apart from our own.

But why and on what basis do we affirm the existence of intelligence and thought in all other human beings and do not entertain any doubt about it? Further, on what basis do we, through observing man–made objects, artifacts and the manifestations of their work, infer the level of their intelligence, their consciousness, thought, knowledge, tastes and feelings.

Didn't Descartes say that all animals with the exception of man were unconscious machines which have been so created that they react like living creatures? How do we know that the same is not true of other people? And how do we know that only animals are machines, without souls and consciousness, that show signs similar to those of living creatures and that all human beings except myself are not such? I am not directly aware of the existence of any intelligence, thoughts and feelings except my own, and may be that they exist only in me and none else. What empirical proof is there that it is not so? The presence of intelligence and thought within me is not sufficient for concluding that something exactly similar to what is in me is present in others.

Because in logical terminology this is reasoning by analogy, that is, considering an individual as the criterion for other individuals, not an empirical proof which involves experimentation with a large number of individuals of a certain species to the point of acquiring certainty that the properties identified are not particular to the individuals involved in the experiment but belong to all the individuals of that species.

As a matter of fact, the inference of intelligence and consciousness in human beings from their effects and artifacts is neither by way of analogy nor by way of empirical inference; rather it is a kind of rational proof. It is true that man directly experiences the presence of such existents as intelligence, will, and thought only within himself and becomes aware of their action, which is to think, decide and to choose, that is to select from among a large number of alternatives one most appropriate to his goal.

But where he studies the activities of others, although he does not observe their intelligence and consciousness, he does observe their action of selecting in their activities. That is, on studying their activities he finds that they constantly select from among the various kinds of activities, or, rather, from among a thousand different options of which only one gives the desired result. While the other options are fruitless that particular one leads to the desired result. They also make their selection in a way to obtain the desired result and disregard the rest.

For example, if a person holds a pen in hand and intends to draw it on a piece of paper to sketch some figure, there are thousands of possible figures which may be drawn, for example the shape of the alphabet mim. If he continues to move the pen on the paper, there are a thousand possible shapes which may be drawn of which one may be the alphabet nun.

Again if he continues this act, out of a thousand possible figures one could be in the shape of the

alphabet ta'. Now, if he holds a pen and its movements give shape to the word, it may be said that the shape drawn had one in a billion (1000 x 1000 x 1000) chance of materializing. Now if he continues this act and writes a few lines and together they takes the form of the following passage:

It is the favour of God, the Glorious and the Mighty, that His obedience results in nearness to Him, and gratitude to Him a double blessing. Every breath that is drawn prolongs life and when exhaled brings delight to the soul; thus in each breath are two blessings and for each blessing thanks are due ...

the chance that all these alphabets have come together accidentally and not as a result of selection, that is, as a result of attention and choice, is so remote as to be unimaginable. That is, human reason normally considers it impossible. It is on this basis that it makes the judgement affirming the existence of a power of selection, which is the same thing as intelligence and will.

This is the reason why we say that the inference of intelligence and thought in man from human artifacts and effects is neither based on analogical reasoning–which merely involves making oneself the criterion for others, like someone who having felt a stomach pain concludes that all people have stomach pains–nor on the basis of empirical evidence.

Because such evidence here would be the establishment of the relation of such artifacts to human intelligence by repeated experiments, that is, by directly observing intelligence and its effects and discovering their connection. Rather this argument is a kind of rational inference which is similar to the inference which the mind makes for affirming the truth of historical reports received from numerous sources (mutawatir). 17

Thus we see that our knowledge of the intelligence and consciousness of other people is not the result of empirical evidence, to say nothing of the argument from design, which establishes the relationship between the universe and God, the Exalted.

Recently this fallacy has found fancy with some Muslim Arab writers and their Iranian followers. They have imagined that the Qur'anic call for studying the signs of creation (ayat) is in fact an invitation to an empirical knowledge of God. They have imagined that when we know God through the study of the signs of creation, our knowledge of God is based on empirical evidence.

From here they arrive at another ridiculous conclusion: “The method to be followed in theological issues is the same as the one followed by natural scientists in studying nature, and that there is no need for us to resort to those complicated and subtle philosophical discussions dealing with theological issues. Instead of bearing the stigma of ignorance or failure to understand them, we declare all of them to be baseless.”

They are ignorant of the fact that the limits of experience only extend up to the knowledge of God's creation. The knowledge of God with the help of the understanding of the creation acquired by empirical means is a kind of a pure rational inference.

2. Mr. Hume has imagined that the theists want to prove that the world has a complete resemblance to human artifacts, and on the basis that similarity of effects is proof of similarity of causes, want to prove that since the world is totally similar to a car or a house, it too has a maker similar to the maker of a machine or a house.

Mr. Hume tells them that this is not the case; the world, more than its resemblance to a ship or a car, resembles the systematic and self-regulating mechanism of a plant or animal.

Firstly, in reply to Mr. Hume it may remarked that the meaning of his words is that the world is not like a car or a ship, but is rather like itself! Did he expect the world to be unlike itself? Are not plants and animals a part of this world? In fact, the discussion is all about the plants and animals which in his own words have been so created that they are self-regulating like a most advanced machine, a thousand times more complicated than man-made ships and machines.

Therefore, the signs of creation in a plant or an animal are more evident than in a ship or a machine. Consequently, if the maker of the ship and the machine is endowed with intelligence and thought, there is a greater reason that the creator of the universe, whose creative power is manifested in plants and animals, should possess intelligence and wisdom.

Secondly, the remark of Mr. Hume about this argument that it essentially involves a kind of analogy (tashbih) and its purpose is to prove the presence of perfect resemblance between the works of the Creator of nature and human artifacts, is wrong. It is impossible that the works of the Creator of nature (God) perfectly resemble products of human make; rather, as the Creator of nature is beyond resemblance to man from the point of view of essence and attributes, so also He is beyond likeness from the angle of act and creation.

Man is a part of nature, and being such he is an existent which is in a continuous state of becoming and moving towards perfection (takamul). All his efforts are directed towards moving from the state of potentiality (quwwah) to that of actuality (fi'l), and from deficiency towards perfection. All the efforts of the human being are a kind of a movement from potentiality to act, and from deficiency towards perfection.

Similarly, man being a part of nature and not its creator, his dispensations concerning nature are of the form of establishing an artificial (unnatural) relation between the parts of nature. Human artifacts like cities, houses and ships consist of natural materials arranged in an artificial order with an aim and purpose which is the aim and purpose of the maker himself and not the aim of the thing made. That maker wants to achieve his goal and purpose through this artificial order.

Thus the two essential characteristics of human artifacts are:

a. The relationship between its parts is artificial and not natural.

b. The aim and objective involved in making it is the aim and objective of the maker. That is, it is the

maker who achieves a certain aim and removes a deficiency from himself and moves from potentiality to actuality through the means of the artifact.

None of these two characteristics can be possibly present in the creation of God, the Exalted. Neither is it possible for the connection between the parts of the creation to be an unnatural one, nor is it possible that the purpose of the creation be the purpose of the Creator. Rather, the connection between the various parts of the creation will have to be natural, just like the one seen in the different parts of the solar system or the atom, or the elements of a natural compound, or the constituents of plants, animals and man.

This is what the metaphysicians imply when they say that 'the final causes of God's acts are all final causes of the act (fi'l), and not those of the Agent (fail) or when they say: Human wisdom implies the selection of the best means for the best of purposes, while Divine wisdom implies bringing the existents to reach their own purposes.

The requirement of wisdom and providence,
is to direct all contingents to their ultimate ends.

This is the meaning of their words when they say:

The higher does not turn towards the lower.

A station belonging to a higher ontic realm does not seek its end in the lower realms. And this is what they imply when they say that the necessary implication of the creation of existents and their issuing forth from the Absolutely Perfect Essence is that all of them have an end and it is love which pervades all existents; and the end of all ends (ghayat al-ghayat) is the Exalted Divine Essence.

This again is the meaning of their statement that human agency is an agency by intention (failiyyah bil-qasd), whereas the agency of God, the Exalted, is agency by providence (fa'liyyah bi al-inayah). In reality, the ideas of Hume and all Western philosophers from the earliest times to the present day concerning the argument from design are childish and amateurish, basing as they do upon the notion that this argument supposes God to be a craftsman like human craftsmen and arguing concerning the existence and non-existence of such a creator. Whereas by proving the existence of such a creator we would not have proved God but a creature of the level of man.

An examination of Hume's rhetorical rendition of the argument from design, which has overshadowed Western philosophy for about three centuries, brings to light once again the weak foundations of philosophy in the West, whether religious or materialist. It shows that the Western notion of the argument from design is not at all philosophical. That which has been discussed in Islamic philosophy under the title 'inayah (providence) has been unknown in the West. The Westerners' conception of this argument has been that of the common man, or at the most of the level of Ash'arite and Mu'tazilite theologians, and not of the order of that of Islamic philosophers and metaphysicians.

3. Mr. Hume says: Supposing this argument proves that the Creator of the world possesses an intelligence and consciousness similar to those of man, even then the claim, which is to prove God's infinite perfection, remains unproved.

Hume's mistake here is that he has imagined that those who consider God as absolute and infinite perfection do so on the basis of the argument from design, which in his opinion is an empirical proof.

We have mentioned in the fifth volume of 'The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism' that the value of argument from design is solely limited to the extent of carrying us up to the frontiers of the supernatural.

This argument only proves that nature has something beyond itself to which it is subject and that beyond is conscious of itself and its acts. Regarding whether this transcendent is necessary or contingent, eternal or emergent (hadith), one or multiple, finite or infinite, omniscient and omnipotent or not, lie outside the limits of this argument. These are issues which wholly and solely belong to the domain of metaphysics, and metaphysics proves them with the help of other arguments.

4. Mr. Hume says: Supposing that our world is the most perfect world possible; but how do we know that the creator of the world has not copied it from some other place or that he has not perfected his craftsmanship gradually through practice?

This criticism too arises from Hume's ignorance of the limits of the application of the argument from design. He has imagined that all the issues of metaphysics are derived from a single argument which is the argument from design. In the second and fifth volumes of 'The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism' we have remarked that the application of argument from design involves proving that nature is not something left to itself and that the forces of nature are subject.

Nature, in the terminology of the philosophers, is an agent by subordination (fa'il bil- taskhir). In other words, nature has a supernatural transcending it which rules and administers it. The argument from design, whose application is limited to this extent, is both clear and sufficient within its own limits. But as to what is the state of the supernatural, whether its perfection is essential or acquired, whether it has been acquired gradually or is eternal like its essence, and so on–all these issues are capable of being researched with the help of a separate set of arguments.

And supposing that they are incapable of being researched with the help of other arguments and are among issues which will always remain unknown to man–though certainly it is not so and they are capable of being researched–this does not decrease the value of the argument from design. The objective of the argument from design is to lead us from nature to the threshold of the supernatural. That which lies beyond this threshold lies outside the scope of this argument.

5. Mr. Hume has mentioned the matter of evil, epidemics, floods and earthquakes as a negation of the presence of a rational pattern in the world.

Considering that we have discussed this topic in detail in the book 'Adl al-Ilahi ('Divine Justice'), we shall refrain from taking it up here and refer the reader to that book.

1. Bertrand Russell, The Scientific Outlook, (New York: W.W Norton & Co. 1931) 1st ed., Persian transl. By Hasan Mansur, Jahanbini ye 'Ilmi, pp 82-8
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., pp 92-3
5. Ibid., 94
6. Ibid., p94
7. This sentence in the Persian translation of this passage from Russell cited by the author has been translated as follows: "Observation shows that creation out of nothing is impossible." This error in the translation affects the author's criticism relating to this part of Russell's statements. Editor
8. Ibid., pp 96-7
9. Ibid., pp 87-8
10. Richard H. Popkin & Avrum Stroll, Philosophy Made Simple, p106
11. Ibid., p103
12. Ibid., p102
13. Ibid., p103
14. Ibid., p104
15. Ibid., p105
16. Ibid.
17. Authors note: We have studied and discussed this topic in greater detail in our studies on epistemology (shenakht), which we hope to publish in the future.

Source URL:
https://www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/vol12-vol13/causes-responsible-materialist-tendencies-west-3-4-murtadha-mutahhari#comment-0

Links
[1] https://www.al-islam.org/person/murtadha-mutahhari
[2] https://www.al-islam.org/organization/al-tawhid-islamic-journal
[3] https://www.al-islam.org/person/mujahid-husayn
[4] https://www.al-islam.org/printpdf/book/export/html/21809
[5] https://www.al-islam.org/printepub/book/export/html/21809
[6] https://www.al-islam.org/printmobi/book/export/html/21809
[7] https://www.al-islam.org/tags/materialism
[8] https://www.al-islam.org/tags/human
[9] https://www.al-islam.org/tags/history
[10] https://www.al-islam.org/tags/islam
[11] https://www.al-islam.org/tags/christianity