

Lesson 37: The Principles of Cause and Effect

Some Points regarding Cause and Effect

A correct conception of the meaning of cause and effect is sufficient for knowing that no existent can be the cause of its own existence, for the meaning of causality rests upon the fact that an existent depends upon the existence of another, so that with regard to the dependence of one upon the other, the concepts of cause and effect are abstracted from them, that is, this is a primary self-evident proposition, and needs no argument.

Sometimes among the discussions of the philosophers one encounters statements which may lead to such misconceptions as that an existent may be the cause of its own existence. For example, regarding God, the Exalted, it has been said, “The existence of the Necessary Existent is required by its own essence.” Even regarding the expression ‘the Necessary Existent by Itself,’ which is used in comparison to ‘the necessary existent by another,’ it is possible that this may be misconstrued in such a way that just as in the case of the necessary existent by another, the ‘other’ is the cause, so too, in the case of the Necessary Existent by Itself, It Itself is the cause.

The truth is that this kind of discussion is the result of the limits of language, and the intent is never to establish a causal relation between the Sacred Divine Essence and Its Own Existence, but rather what is meant is to deny the ascription of being any sort of effect to that Exalted Being.

In order to make this more comprehensible, an example from ordinary (Farsi) language may be mentioned. If someone is asked, “With whose permission did you do this deed?” And he replies, “I did it with my own permission.” Here it is not meant that he actually gave himself permission, but that it did not require anyone’s permission. The expression ‘by itself’ and ‘a requirement of essence’ is really used by the speaker in order to deny causality, not for proving the causality of the essence.

Another point at which confusion arises is that at which philosophers consider matter and form to be causes for compound bodies, while there is really no difference or multiplicity between them, that is, a body is nothing but the conjunction of matter and form, and this implies the unity of cause and effect.

This problem is presented in philosophical texts, and it is answered in the following way. That to which causation is attributed are matter and form themselves, and that to which being an effect is attributed is the conjunction of them, under the condition that they are joined and have a compound structure, that is, if matter and form are viewed apart from being conjoined and being compounded, each of them may be considered a cause of the 'whole.'

Whenever they are considered under the condition of being joined, compounded and in the form of a whole, we call it the effect of its parts, for the existence of the whole depends on the existence of its parts.

This answer returns us to the point that the difference between cause and effect is relative to our perspective and respect (i'tibar), while the causal relation is a matter of fact and is independent of respects (although in another sense in regard to whatish concepts, it is called respectival (i'tibari)).

The truth is that the application of [the concept of] cause to matter and form, and the application of [the concept of] effect to the conjunction of them is not free from imprecision, as was previously indicated. And if a body which is apt to take a new form is allowably called the material cause for the succeeding existent, this is because it prepares the grounds for the latter's appearance.

Another point may be made with regard to the fundamentality of existence. Since the causal relation really holds between two existences, it is clear that the whatness of something cannot be considered the cause of its existence, for whatness in itself has no reality such that it could really be the cause of something.

Likewise, a whatness cannot be considered the cause of another whatness. It is possible that it will be said that philosophers have divided causes into two types: causes of whatnesses and causes of existence.

An example of the first type is the causation of line and surface for the whatness of a triangle, and the causation of matter and form for the whatness of body. An example of the second type is the causation of the existence of fire for the existence of heat. Thus it is known that in their view there exists a kind of causal relation among whatnesses.

But this kind of discussion must be considered to be due to a looseness of the language, that is, just as, with regard to objective existence and the external world, the causal relation holds between existents, and the external existence of the effect depends upon the external existence of the cause, such a relation can also be imagined in the mental world, in the case that the conception of a whatness depends upon the conception of something else, as the conception of a triangle depends on the conception of line and surface. An implication of this looseness of language is that one cannot establish that the principles of real and entified causes and effects also apply to them.

A similar looseness also can be found in the case of secondary philosophical intelligibles, as when

‘possibility’ is considered to be ‘the cause of need for a cause,’ while neither possibility nor need are entified things, and between them it is meaningless to suppose that there is a real causal relation or influence in the external world. One of these cannot be considered the cause and the other the effect.

What is meant here is that by attending to the possibility of a whatness, the intellect is led to the recognition of this whatness’s need for a cause, not that possibility, which is interpreted as the lack of necessity for existence or nonexistence, has a reality by means of which something else comes into existence called ‘the need for a cause.’

We can conclude from this that the discussion of cause and effect which is presented as being one of the most basic philosophical discussions, in which specific principles for cause and effect are propounded, must be restricted to causes and effects in the external world, and real relationships between them. If in other cases the expression ‘causation’ is employed, this is due to imprecision or looseness of language.

The Impossibility of a Causal Circle

One of the topics which is presented pertaining to the causal relation is that it is impossible for any existent, with regard to the aspect in which it is the cause and influence of the appearance of another existent, should be, in that very aspect, the effect and in need of that other existent. In other words, no cause can be the effect of its own effect.

From another perspective, a cause cannot be the cause of its own cause. This may be put in yet another way by saying that it is impossible for an existent to be both cause and effect of another existent. This is the proposition of the impossibility of a circle of causes, which can be considered to be self-evident, or at least close to being self-evident.

If the subject and predicate of this proposition are properly understood, there will be no room for doubt about it, for the implication of being a cause is being without need and the implication of being an effect is being in need, and the conjunction of being without need and being in need in one aspect is a contradiction.

It is possible that in this field doubts may arise which result from lack of precision regarding the meaning of the subject and predicate, as is the case for many self-evident propositions. For example, one may imagine that if a man’s own food is obtained only through farming, that if it were not for the products of his own farming, he would die of hunger. In this way, the above-mentioned products on the one hand would be the effects of farming and on the other hand would be the cause of it.

Hence the supposed farmer would be the cause of the cause of himself, and also the effect of the effect of himself! However, not only is the farmer not the real cause of the products of farming, and is merely a preparatory cause for them, and not only are the products of farming also not the cause of the existence

of the farmer, but rather these products are only elements upon which the continuity of his life is dependent.

In other words, the existence of the farmer during the times of sowing and reaping, is a cause and not an effect, and later, it is an effect and not a cause. Likewise, the farm products, at the time of their growing, are effects, and not causes, but at the times of feeding the farmer, they are causes, and not effects. Hence being a cause and being an effect are not with regard to the same aspect. The only thing that can be said in this regard is that an existent at one time may be the preparatory cause for something which it will need in the future.

What is meant by an impossible circle is not this sort of relation; rather what is meant is that an existent which in the same aspect in which it is the cause of the appearance of something else cannot be, in that same aspect of its being an effect, the effect of it and in need of it. In other words, it gives something to an effect which it needs from it in order to possess that same thing, and which must be obtained from this effect.

Another problem is that we see that heat causes the appearance of fire, while fire is also the cause of the heat. Hence, heat is the cause of the cause of itself. The solution to this problem is also clear, for the heat which is the cause of the fire is other than the heat which comes into existence as an effect of the fire.

Although these two heats may be one in kind, they are multiple with regard to their existence in the external world. What is meant by unity pertaining to this principle [of the impossibility of a circle of causes] is individual unity, not conceptual unity. In reality, this problem is a result of confusion between conceptual unity and the unity of instances, or is a result of confusion between two meanings of unity.

Other inconsequential problems have been presented by some materialists and Marxists, which need not be mentioned if attention is paid to the concepts of the principle [of the impossibility of a circle of causes] and the answers to the problems mentioned above.

The Impossibility of an Infinite Regress

The literal meaning of regress (tasalsul) is cases following one another in a chain, whether the links in this chain are finite or infinite, and whether or not there is a causal relation among them. However, the technical meaning is restricted to cases in which one or both directions of the chain are infinite.

Philosophers consider an infinite regress to be impossible under two conditions: First is that among the links of the chain there should be a real ordering, such that each link should follow another in reality, not conventionally; the other is that all of the links should exist at the same time, not such that when one is destroyed another comes into existence following it. For this reason, an infinite sequence of events in time is not considered to be essentially impossible.

At the same time, in the common parlance of philosophy, an infinite regress is not restricted to causal regresses, and many reasons which are given for the impossibility of a regress include regresses in which there is no causal relation among the links, such as the proofs advanced against actual infinity (Burhan-e Musamatah, Burhan-e Tatbiq, and Burhan-e Sullami) which are mentioned in the detailed books of philosophy. In these proofs, some mathematical premises are employed, although there is dispute about them.

However, some proofs are specific to causal regresses, such as the proof given by Farabi known as Burhan- e Asadd Akhsar ('the firmest and most concise proof'), and it may be stated as follows: If it is supposed that each link in a chain of existents is dependent upon another, such that if a prior link does not exist, the dependent link would also fail to occur, this implies that this regress as a whole is dependent on another existent, for it is supposed that all of its links have this feature (of being dependent on another), and there is no alternative but to suppose that there is an existent at the head of the chain which is not itself dependent on something else. Until that existent occurs, the links of the chain will not come into existence in succession.

Hence, such a chain cannot be infinite in the direction of its beginning. In other words, an infinite regress of causes is impossible. Similar to this is a proof which is founded on the basis of the principles established by Sadr al-Muta'allihin in his transcendent philosophy for the impossibility of a regress of existence-giving causes.

It may be presented as follows: According to the fundamentality of existence and the relatedness of the existence of the effect to the existence-giving cause, every effect in relation to its creative cause is just that relation and dependence itself. It has no independence of its own. If a given cause is an effect in relation to a prior cause, it will have that same state (of dependence) to the prior cause.

Thus, if a chain of causes and effects is assumed, each of whose causes is the effect of another cause, it will be a chain of relations and dependencies. It is self-evident that dependent existence cannot occur without the occurrence of an independent existence upon which the former depends. Thus, inevitably there must be an independent existence beyond this chain of relations and dependencies in the light of which all of them occur. Therefore, this series cannot be considered to be without a beginning and without an absolutely independent member.

The difference between these two proofs lies in the fact that the first proof covers all real causes (causes which must necessarily exist with their effects), while the second proof is restricted to existence-giving causes, and which also covers complete causes, as they include existence-giving causes.

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