

Kant on Categories Compared with Mulla Sadra on Secondary Intelligibles in the Example of Causality

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1. The Analysis of Causality by Modern Western Philosophers

When Hume tried to evaluate the meaning of causality, he found that the meaning of causality has no referent in reality. We saw the fire and the burning and we have some impressions of both, but we cannot find any referent in the external world for causality and the necessary relation between cause and effect. He had no option to attribute causality other than the mental situation of concepts. He argued that the meaning of causality cannot be other than the mental concept that is ascribed by

In Hume's point of view, perceptions are of two categories: impressions and conceptions. The impression of data without the mediation of senses and conceptions is indeed the annihilation of impression. Their difference is in the degree of their influence.

Hume believes that true conception is one which is eventually based on an impression. A conception that is not converted into an impression has no experiential origin and is the result of relations that mind establishes among conceptions....

2. Kant's Explanation of Causality

Kant examines the logical conditions for acquiring knowledge. He classifies all propositions based on Aristotelian logic and in correspondence to each of them, proposes a general meaning: "If we decompose all composed propositions with respect to whether they have objective reality or not, we come to the conclusion that they are not made up of pure percepts; in fact, if one of the pure mental concepts were not attached to the concepts abstracted from perception, then, such propositions would be totally impossible."¹ These concepts are *a priori* and are not abstracted from observable data. Among these concepts known as pure mental categories is the principle of causality. The concept of "necessity" falls into this same category. However, this *a priori* principle informs us solely of the relations among objects and merely indicates that each given effect should have a cause. Given the existence of the effect and by relying on this principle alone, we cannot determine the cause, for Kant believes that concepts without experience are void and do not yield knowledge.

Kant's definition of experience is different from that of the empiricists and rationalists. Experience, for Kant, forms in the interaction between mind and matter. Objectivity of experience lies in the application of pure mental categories to the plurality of pure perception.² Therefore, Kant's philosophy stands in contrast to Hume's conception of causality, because Kant is heavily influenced by Newton's physics, and to confirm it, he requires the general authority of the law of causality. Hume justified causality using his empirical doctrine. He explained causal necessity with the law of association, regarded as one of the psychological principles of the human mind. In fact, the concept of necessity was an entanglement in Hume's metaphysics, for he did not know where to place it in his philosophy. Hume deemed causal relations composed and are related to reality, and he thought that since necessity can merely be sought in analytical propositions, where the predicate is implied by the subject, we cannot talk about causal necessity. Kant, on the other hand, held the belief that necessity has a more extended meaning. The necessity of a proposition

¹ (Kourner, 1367, p. 177)

² Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, tr. Lewis White Beck (New York: Bobbs- Merrill Company Inc., 1950), 48.

does not depend on the implicit inclusion of predicate in the subject; rather, it refers to the *a priori* nature of the concepts employed in it. Kant does not justify necessity by psychological inclinations or induction; he rather holds that experience does not provide the necessity and generality of propositions, but merely indicates the proximity or the succession of phenomena. Thus, the generality and the necessity of a proposition depend on the *a priori* images of the mind; images that are predicated upon sensual representations and give them objectivity. Kant takes issue with those who see the principle of causality as the abstraction of mind and rely on the frequent occurrence of phenomena.

We should take into account that Hume looks for the source of causal inference, while Kant deals with causal knowledge. One who seeks the source of acquiring knowledge will finally turn to psychological explanations. But Kant thinks about the logical conditions of acquiring knowledge, though we cannot claim that he managed to leave subjectivism behind.

3. General Features of Causality in Islamic Philosophy

If we now draw a comparison between the analysis of causality in Islamic philosophy and in Kant's philosophy, we observe that in Islamic philosophy, unlike Western philosophy, causality is not taken from experience, but it is something arrived at through rational analysis, and it is one of the "secondary intelligibles" that cannot be perceived through experiential analysis, the latter being the approach of modern Western philosophy to the analysis of causation.

Here is a summary of the attitude of Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy toward causality in comparison with other thoughts, based on Motahari's exposition:

1. The law of causality and all laws derived from that are self-evident laws, independent from our mind and perceptions.
2. Our perceptual conception of causality and causedness does not originate from an external sense, but from an internal examination, the essence of self and sensual states ...

3. Our confirmative conception of the law of causality and causedness (based on the need to have a cause) and its derivatives originate from mental reasoning and are independent from experience.

4. The law of causality is an aspect of absolute reality and is not specific to matter and material relations.

5. The law of causality and its derivatives are philosophical laws and their investigation is beyond the scope of particular and individual sciences.

6. The law of causality and its derivatives should inevitably be employed as the principal subject in particular individual sciences and these sciences cannot claim that they do not need this law at all.

7. Knowing the perfect cause results in knowing the effect, and therefore, the existence of cause can lead us to the existence of effect.

8. The events of this world have “temporal necessity”; that is, an event can take place merely in a determined instant, not sooner or later.

9. Temporal conditions are not the perfect cause of later conditions; rather, they prepare the grounds for later conditions and yet, complete knowledge about these grounds gives rise to conclusive prediction.

10. Metaphysical destiny and will are not meaningful in parallel with natural causes (but in hierarchical relation with them).³

In Islamic philosophy the origin of the conception of causality is introspection (i.e., with conscious knowledge about oneself and one’s states, the meaning and the referent of causality is perceived existentially and is then transferred to the external world). “When we observe this relation (i.e., human actions arising from inner self), we also observe the existential needs and their taking refuge in the soul and the existential independence of soul ... The turn to the general law of causality and causedness starts right here.”⁴

³ (Motahari, pp. 232, 233).

⁴ Mohammad Hussein Tabataba’I, *Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism with Annotations of Motahari 3* (Qom: Islamic Publications, n.d.), 291.

4. Comparison of Causality in Kant and Islamic Philosophy

A brief overview of the evolution of historical attitudes of modern Western philosophers toward causality reveals that causality was reduced from an external existential analysis to a mental subjective analysis, resulting in Western subjectivism. Berkeley changed causality into “reason”, a subjective relation; Locke put forth the relation among conceptions; Malebranche negated all causalities beyond divine action; Leibniz transformed the principle of causality to the principle of sufficient reason, a kind of mental expectation; and Kant then derived causality from mental categories. After that, in modern science, the only thing that remained from causality was its interpretation as a scientific law, in such a way that even in the twentieth century, in confrontation with some physical phenomena, its validity was questioned. The challenges modern Western philosophy faced in discussing causality originated from the fact that for the analysis of causality, these philosophers made experience their point of departure. Experience would neither require a necessity nor become meaningful without interaction with the senses.

In general, comparing the way causality was treated in Islamic philosophy with the modern Western philosophical tradition that culminated in Kant, we can enumerate the following differences:

1. In the discussion of causality in modern Western philosophy, experience was the point of departure, in such a way that even rationalist philosophers like Leibniz based their analysis of causality on experiential observations. In this regard Hume rightly illustrated the requirements of this kind of attitude toward causality that finally results in the association of ideas. It is true that Hume looked at causality from the perspective of empiricism, but he is still a philosopher. He could not evade the subjective aspect of causality and he finally filled this gap with psychological rules. Materialists, by contrast, held themselves aloof from anything that had a trace of intellect and located causality in material evidence; for instance, they deemed heat the cause of boiling of water and gravity the cause of the earth’s movement.⁵ In Islamic philosophy, however, causality is a rational discussion known to us through intellectual perception and is considered

⁵ Innocentius Bochenski, *Contemporary European Philosophy*, tr. Sharaf al-Din Khorasani (Tehran: Scientific-Cultural Publications, 1383 AH [1963]), 1-4.

one of the philosophical secondary intelligibles; experience is also examined with this intellectual basis, but in Western philosophy mental analyses are performed via empirical observations.

2. Since the basis of the analysis of causality in the West was experience and experience could not offer any necessity, explanation of causal necessity faced many challenges. When Newtonian physics was at its zenith, this necessity changed into the conclusiveness of laws of physics, formulated on the basis of accurate mathematical relations. Therefore, the meaning of necessity changed into determinism and in the twentieth century, the determinacy of Newtonian laws were questioned with issues like Heisenberg's uncertainty principle; in the eye of some Western physicists and philosophers, it is interpreted as the negation of causal necessity. However, in Islamic philosophy, because causal necessity is something rational and self-evident, no physical phenomena can question it. Therefore, in such cases, the uncertainty originates from epistemological restrictions or the mutual influence and interaction between the experimenter and the experiment.

3. In modern Western philosophy causality is inferred from the relations observed in the external world, and it is explained by the interaction of these data and our epistemological system; therefore, the basis of this principle was empirical findings. In Islamic philosophy, however, causality is inferred from the relationship human beings existentially perceive between self and will, and it is then employed in epistemology.

4. Another distinction between the ideas of Western philosophers and Islamic sages is the priority the former have placed on their epistemological or ontological discussions. Of course, there is no doubt that in many cases ontology and epistemology have proceeded in parallel with each other. "There has always been some sort of harmony between ontology and epistemology, i.e., the explanation each individual gives about knowledge is logically related with his attitude towards existence and existential issues".⁶ However, it seems that for Western philosophers, especially those after Descartes (who created a radical change in philosophical subjects, and shifted their attention from metaphysical and ontological concerns to epistemological ones), epistemology had priority, whereas to Muslim sages ontology has always had precedence over

⁶ Abdollah Javadi Amoli, *Explanation of the Arguments for the Substantiation of God* (Qom: Isra', 1384 AH [1964]), 63.

epistemological issues and “the discussion of knowledge”, in their view, “has always begun with ontological propositions.”⁷

Thus, for the investigation of causality, the starting point and the reliance of Western philosophers had been an epistemological point, while for Muslim philosophers, the examination of causality had an ontological point of departure; this created a divergence between them as to how to make the principle of causality their base and foundation. For the Western thinker who sees epistemology as successful and superior, the source of knowledge and the principle of causality have their roots in sense and experience, while to the Islamic thinker, who gives priority to ontology, the principle of causality is seen not only as the basis and foundation of human knowledge, but rather as an existential issue that should not only justify and explain human deeds, but also describe divine acts.⁸

5. In modern Western philosophy, with its epistemological approach to philosophy, causality changed from an objective issue to a subjective one, and therefore the reliance of causality on external phenomena, with regard to the dualistic problems of subject-object, brought about many challenges. The principle of causality in modern Western philosophy is analyzed subjectively, while in Islamic philosophy this principle flows throughout the universe, from mind to matter. In modern Western philosophy, this has created a problem: generalizing the principle of causality to the whole world, especially the world of matter (the objective world) gives rise to the problem of the relation between subject and object, whereas in Islamic philosophy, the principle of causality is known as a self-evident issue that embraces the whole universe, including mind and matter. Not only do we perceive the principle of causality existentially, but we also perceive its self-evident quality existentially, and as a result, that also embraces the whole external world and will have the causal necessity in the external world.

6. Since in Western philosophy the basis of the perception of causality is experience and it tries to reach the principle of causality through experience, in the analysis of causal necessity, certain problems may arise, and this will cast doubt on this necessity, since it is not observed in the relations between external cause and effect. However, since in Islamic philosophy causality is seen as a self-evident and philosophical secondary

⁷ Amoli, 63.

⁸ Ian Richard Netton, “Neo-Platonism in Islamic Philosophy”, in Edward Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (CD) (London: Routledge, 1998).

intelligible, there is no doubt as to its necessity in the external world. Consequently, when between two phenomena that appear to be cause and effect, such a necessity is not observed, this is related to the deficiency of our knowledge about cause and effect; that is to say, we have not been able to perceive the perfect cause, and what is here called cause is in fact an imperfect cause. It is clear that knowing a perfect cause in the material world and in the relations among objects is not possible, but its necessity is accepted. Different kinds of causes that Aristotle proposes are developed in the context of his attention to experience. In effect, material, formal, final, and agentive causes are the external evidence of causality and are classified inductively and based on empirical evidence. The Muslim philosopher does not consider the principle of causality responsible for finding cause and effect in the context of reality; that is why if he does not find the cause and effect, he does not struggle to negate a rational principle.

In modern physics where causality is reduced to determinism, theories like the Heisenberg uncertainty principle were interpreted as a negation of the law of causality, whereas in Islamic philosophy no inconclusiveness can refute the law of causality and inconclusiveness is related to the weakness of epistemology or to some other reasons.

7. Analysis of causality in modern Western philosophy was based on the obligation of spatial succession and contiguity of cause and effect, because Western philosophers based their analysis upon empirical observations. In Islamic philosophy, however, cause and effect are temporally simultaneous and their anteriority and posteriority are a matter of causal priority. In this regard the Western attitude and the attitude of Muslim theologians were along the same lines. Therefore, we see that in his arguments to substantiate the existence of God, Leibniz uses the principle of sufficient reason and the impossibility of the infinite regression of sufficient reasons; this amounts to the priority of occasional cause over effect, and assumes a temporal priority. Thus, in the West, any discussion about causality leads to occasional cause, while in Islamic philosophy doubts about infinite regression can be removed rationally, and even in the Transcendent Philosophy where the caused is an attribute of the cause, the explanation of the cause of all causes and the negation of the infinite regression are not a problem at all; rather, the attitude of the principality of existence to causality, at the very beginning, points to the all-sufficient existence of God and then to other existents that have an innate existential dependence.

8. Islamic philosophy too, in spite of acknowledging causal necessity, shares with modern Western philosophy the fact that in composed propositions, we cannot arrive at a necessary relation in the world. But, that we cannot arrive at necessity is not because necessity does not exist in the external world; rather, we are unable to perceive the perfect evidence of cause and effect via our faculties of perception like our senses. Hence, the problem of most Western philosophers in negating external causality—that is, using the law of causality itself and carelessly presupposing it (cf. Russell's critique of Hume) to negate causality—is no problem for Islamic philosophy at all.