

Causality and Islamic Thought
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Causality and Islamic Thought

The great disputants within the Islamic tradition, the Mutakallimun, laid down the basis for rational discussion of causality by affirming the right of reason to engage in independent research. This affirmation could not be absolute; it took the form of a division of the spheres of competence belonging, respectively, to reason and Law. Reason was declared to be the judge in ontological and epistemological questions, whereas the sphere of ethics and legislation were left subject to religious Law. Certainly, this division should not be understood too rigidly. The Mutakallimun often remained loyal to the Law and did not permit reason to execute its rights to the full even when disputing ontological problems. On the other hand, in the sphere of legislation they asserted the rights of reason to define new norms, not established in Revelation, on the basis of rational analysis of revealed Law, thus defying the Zahiriyya, "people of the manifest," who denied the legitimacy of rational procedures for determining new norms of law.

To inquire about causality is to ask whether a phenomenon is subject to logical analysis that discriminates in its structure cause, effect, and a necessary relation between them. The rights of reason asserted by the Mutakallimun provided an opportunity for such analysis.

This does not mean, however, that the Mutakallimun carried out the task to the full. The term "cause" (*'illa, sabab*), as well as its derivatives ("causality" - *'illiyya*, "to give reason" - *i'talla*), are too scarcely met in their writings. One would rather maintain that the Mutakallimun strove to define the spheres in which the search for causality is relevant. Their basic method is negative, and its nature is best clarified through a comparison with the Qur'anic idea of the absolute Divine will. Without denying the Divine will and creativity as the last foundation of existence, the Mutakallimun nonetheless introduced *logical* restrictions on it. They did so while disputing the "permissibility" (*jiwaz*) and "impossibility" (*ihala*) or certain acts, including acts of God, and establishing these on logical grounds. The rational arguments here sometimes outweighed even Qur'anic evidence.

According to the Mutakallimun, the subject matter of rational discourse falls into two parts: God and the world. There is no similarity between them, so the world may be referred to as "non-God" (*ghayr allah*) or "besides-God" (*ma siwa allah*). Despite this ontological split, however, God and the world make up a field of uniform discourse, and the same logic applies to both of these ontologically different parts.

[494] There are two general questions that the Mutakallimun put concerning the relation between God and the world: is there any cause (*'illa*) for the Divine act of creation? and is there any cause for the Law given to the people?

One of the prominent Mutakallimun, Abu al-Hudhail al-'Allaf, argued that any act - including Divine creation - must necessarily be based upon some reasonable foundation. People were created for their own "benefit" (*manfa`a*); otherwise, for al-'Allaf, Divine creation makes no sense (al-Ash`ari, 1980, p. 252). Another well known Mutakallim, Mu`tamir, argued that a creative act has its foundation; that that foundation must have its own foundation, and so on ad infinitum. Thus the recursive search for cause has

no limit (*ghaya*). For al-Nazzam, "formation" (*takawwun*) itself serves as sufficient reason for creation. Thus he introduced, as al-Ash'ari wrote, the concept of final cause (*gharad*) (al-Ash'ari, 1980. p. 470). Finally, some Mutakallimun argued that the world was created for no reason at all.

Is there any rational basis, reason and cause (*'illa*) for what is prescribed and what is prohibited by Revealed Law? Radical rationalists among the Mutakallimun argued that every prescription has its cause. Moreover, any new norm of law (*far'*) can be established only after it has been co-measured (*qiyas*) with these causes, so that the causes "are continuous" (*ittirad*) and survive in the newly established legal norm. Thus the new norm of law, though adopted by people and not revealed by God, is nevertheless justified by the cause that necessitated one of the norms of Revealed Law. This view proceeded from the assumption that the human mind is capable of knowing the reasons that guided God's intentions. And, of course, some Mutakallimun could not help saying the opposite, arguing that there is no cause besides God's will for any prescription of Revealed Law (al-Ash'ari, 1980, p. 470).

Another question in connection with which causality was discussed in Kalam concerned the changes that occur in our world. Daily experience shows that bodies remain unchanged only for limited periods of time, after which alteration inevitably occurs. On what *basis* do these changes take place?

It might seem that the division of everything in the world into "substances" (*jawahir*) and "accidents" (*'awarid*), which most Mutakallimun eventually embraced, already answers the question. Accidents are attributes that bodies acquire, or of which they are deprived: as accidents replace each other, a body's "state" (*hal*) changes. From this point of view, the instability of accidents is the cause of the world's transformation.

However, the question of change in the world may be rephrased in that case: what is the cause of the constant coming-and-going of accidents? Even those Mutakallimun who argued that any body always exhibits all of the possible *classes* of accidents, had to provide an explanation for why the given - and not its opposite - accident is found in the body at a particular moment. This question was formulated with respect to the "priority" (*awlawiyya*) that the existence of one of the two opposite accidents has over the existence of the other. For example, "motion" and "rest" are opposite accidents that equally "deserve" or "have the right" (*istihqaq*) to be manifested in the body: why then is it one and not the other that gains existential preference at some moment, later giving way to its counterpart? It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the Mutakallimun advanced almost every possible answer to this question. The variety of their theories is rivalled only by their incompatibility.

Some of them reproduced the scheme that explained changes in bodies, to supply a reason for the presence of accidents. There is something that accounts for the existence of the given, as opposed to its opposite, accident, they argued. This is called *ma`na* ("meaning"; the term is sometimes translated as "nature" or "idea": see Chittick, 1983, pp. 15, 352; Wolfson, 1965). Motion outweighs rest and exists in the given body because there is

the "meaning of motionability" (*ma`na al-harakiyya*) in that body. The Ash'arite school later expressed this as a general rule: "Any change of attribute (*wasf*) in being is due to some meaning (*ma`na*) that takes place in it" (al-Baghdadi, 1981, p. 55).

Certainly, this way of reasoning provides no final explanation, since it initiates an infinite regress. If any foundation, any "meaning," has to be justified by its own foundation, the resulting chain of principles is unending. But many Mutakallimun maintained what was to become a generally accepted rule for medieval thinkers: an infinite cause-and-effect chain is absurd. The infinite regress must be interrupted at some stage. Where exactly? Perhaps the goal is achieved if a search for the explanation-of-an-explanation is forbidden. In fact, some Mutakallimun argued that *ma`na* explains the existence of an accident while itself existing for no reason. But the decision to halt the regress at that stage is rather arbitrary; why not, then, give up looking for a justification at all? Accordingly, the view that an accident exists without any cause was expressed by some Mutakallimun, although this admission certainly violated the principle of sufficient reason.

Another way to approach the problem is to explain the change of accidents in terms of their appearance, after pre-existing as hidden in the body, rather than in terms of their entering the body from outside. This theory is known as the "latency-and-manifestation" (*kumun wa zuhur*) doctrine. According to it, a body becomes heated, for example, not because the quality of heatedness is added to it, but because the latent corpuscles of fire appear on its surface. The doctrine's opponents argued - and with good reason - that there must nonetheless be a cause that accounts for an accident's "appearance" even if the accident does not enter the body from outside. Thus this theory still faces the objections discussed earlier.

The Ash'arite school of late Kalam finally concluded that it is impossible to find a sufficient reason to account for the change of accidents, and thus gave up all attempts to find a rational explanation of the world's transformation. Instead of offering such an explanation, they spoke in terms of "origination" (*huduth*), the nearest analogue of theological "creation" (*khalq*): "If there is no latency-and-manifestation, but bodies really undergo alterations of their states, and accidents cannot travel from body to body, then an accident's existence in substance is its origination in it" (al-Baghdadi, 1981, p. 56).

But what are cause (*'illa*) and effect (*ma`lul*) as such? On the whole, the Mutakallimun gave two contrary definitions of these concepts: first, a cause is a thing that *precedes* its effect (a cause never exists "together" (*ma`a*) with its effect); [496] and, second, a cause is always *together* (*ma`a*) with its effect, since nothing that can precede the thing may be its cause. Al-Nazzam acknowledged both possibilities, and added to the list the concept of a final cause (*gharad*) that "exists after its effect, as when someone says: I have built this sunshade to find shelter from the sun -but shelter is found only after the sunshade is accomplished" (al-Ash`ari, 1980, p. 391).

Furthermore, the Mutakallimun distinguished causes of which the effects are "necessary" and "inevitable" (*'illat idtirar*, *'ijab*) - what in modern terminology would be called "natural causes" like fire causing pain or the

push that makes a stone fall down - and causes that act according to a person's choice (*'illat ikhtiyar*), like religious prescriptions that are observed or not according to one's will and which later cause one's punishment or reward (al-Ash'ari, 1980, pp. 389-91).

Triumphant Aristotelianism did not silence altogether the free debates of the Mutakallimun (which may well be compared in this respect to pre-Socratic philosophizing), but it provided unequivocal and indisputable answers to those questions that the Kalam so ardently and fruitfully discussed, having defined the unshakable patterns of wisdom for future generations.

The discussion of causality in Islamic peripatetism is directly connected with the problem of "ordering" (*tartib; dabt*). All beings form a *sequence*; in other words, one exists always and only *after* another. No two things exist each owing to the other, Ibn Sina says, and no two things necessarily presuppose each other (Ibn Sina, 1957, Pt 2, pp. 200-13). The sequence of beings is understood in two ways -logically and chronologically. In any case, any given step -be it a step of the logical order of existence or of its chronological order - is represented by only one member of the sequence. It follows that cause-and-effect relations develop in only one direction and are irreversible. This means, first, that we can always distinguish a cause from its effect (the first always comes *before* the second either logically or chronologically), and, second, that an effect cannot influence its cause (what *follows* cannot influence what has *passed*). The general conclusion is thus formulated: "With the elimination of a cause its effect is eliminated too, but the elimination of an effect doesn't eliminate its cause" (Ibn Sina, 1957, Pt 2, p. 215). This applies to instances in which the cause and effect coincide in time, so that the absence of the effect gives the impression that the absence of the cause is produced by it, as in the case of a key's movement being caused by the movement of one's hand. In such cases the cause "precedes" the effect logically, or "by essence" (*taqaddum bi al-dhat*). Logical precedence also takes place in the realm of the metaphysical principles of being that are not subject to temporal changes. Thus the concepts of "precedence" (*taqaddum*) and "retardation" (*ta'akhkhur*) lie at the core of the doctrine of strict linear causality.

It is most typical for Ibn Sina, both in logic and in metaphysics, to draw a distinction between essence (*dhat*) and existence (*wujud*). This distinction, of course, is paralleled, although not in every respect, by medieval Western philosophers. The chief aim of Ibn Sina is to distinguish two types of causes: causes of essence and causes of existence. The causes that he speaks of are the four well known causes introduced by Aristotle: material, formal, efficient, and final. For [497] example, the causes of a chair are, accordingly, the material of which it was made, the way it was shaped, the carpenter who produced it, and our will to use it for sitting. Only some of these necessitate existence; accordingly, causes are subordinated so that the cause of existence appears to precede, logically or in time, causes of quiddity (Ibn Sina, 1958, Pt 3, p. 443). Such a cause turns out to be the efficient or final cause, the latter being reduced to the first, for the final

cause is the "efficient cause for the causality of efficient cause" (Ibn Sina, 1958. Pt 3, pp. 441-2).

The peripatetics, as well as other thinkers, provided sophisticated proofs for the impossibility of an infinite sequence of essences that necessitate each other's existence (see, for example, Ibn Sina, 1958, Pt 3. pp. 449-55: al-Suhrawardi, 1952, pp. 63-4). Any cause-and-effect sequence is finite, and its final principle is the First Cause, or First Essence - the philosophical concept of Divinity. This First Cause is the "cause for all existence and for the cause of the essence of each being" (Ibn Sina, 1958. Pt 3, p. 446).

So the basis of the sequence is radically different from the sequence itself: what in the final analysis is the cause of everything has itself no cause. This means that there are two basically different types of relation of being to existence. "Each being in its self (*dhat*), regardless of everything else, either necessarily possesses existence in itself, or does not. If it does, it is true by itself (*haqq bi dhati-hi*) and necessarily exists by itself: this is the Ever-existent" (Ibn Sina. Pt 3, 1958, p. 447). As for all other beings, they are neither necessary by themselves (for if they were, they would need no cause to exist), nor impossible (for then they would not exist at all). Considered as such. they are "possible" (*mumkin*) beings. This concept embraces beings for which neither of the alternatives of existence and non-existence has any preference. Neither of them can gain priority (*awlawiyya*) by itself. One of the two, "to exist," must become "prior" (*awla*) to the other and outweigh its alternative in the scales of preference. It is precisely the cause that provides such priority. The "possible being," after it is "bound" (*muta`alliq*) to its cause, becomes "necessary" (*wajib*: also *wajib al-wujud* - "necessarily-existent"). Since its necessity has an external source and is not derived from its essence, it is "necessarily-existent-by-the-other" (*wajib al-wujud li-ghayri-hi*).

This line of reasoning seems to leave little room for non-determined events. All that exists (with the exception of the Divine essence) exists only due to its cause. On the other hand, when "cause, be it nature or determinant will. is there, effect takes place inevitably" (Ibn Sina, 1958. Pt 3, p. 522). But it should not escape our attention that Ibn Sina divides all causes (as did the Mutakallimun) into the natural and the subjective, and the latter might well be viewed as acting "by choice." or freely. But even for natural events, determinism is not as straightforward as it might appear. As al-Farabi maintains, not only necessary, but also contingent (*ittifaqiyya*) events take place in the natural world. The first have "proximate causes" (like the fire that causes heating), the second have "remote causes." However, al-Farabi's concept of contingency is subjective rather than objective, for contingent events are those for which the causes cannot "be put in order and known," so it might well be that they only *appear* contingent while having in fact a very long chain of causes necessitating them (al-Farabi, 1890, p. 110). Ibn Sina argues that [498] a cause has to be in an appropriate "state (*hal*) in order to become an "actual cause": otherwise it does not bring about its effect. Thus Avicenna tries to explain the "delay" of effects and the very fact of the temporal development of the cause-and-effect sequence. This was not a problem for the Mutakallimun, for whom it was the will of God that

"originates" changes in the world, so that the world's temporal development seemed to need no special explanation. But for Ibn Sina, the First Cause cannot will anything, since otherwise it would not be perfect. (Accordingly, there is no final cause for the existence of the world - Ibn Sina, 1958, Pt 3, pp.553-61.) Moreover, if the effect of the never-changing cause (which is the First Cause) "may be necessary and eternal" (Ibn Sina, Pt 3, 1958, p. 523), and this effect serves as the cause for the next being in the order of existence, and an effect inevitably exists if its cause exists, then it needs to be explained why not all possible events have yet occurred in our world, given the eternity of the First Cause and its effects. This is where the concept of "state" (*hal*) comes in. The state of the First Cause never changes, but its remote effects - that is, the causes that act in our world - have yet to reach the state needed for their actual causality. The concept of "state" includes such things as the availability of instruments necessary for an action, tools, assistants, a suitable time, a stimulus, as well as the absence of an "obstacle" (*mani`*) to the fulfillment of the action (Ibn Sina, 1958, Pt 3, pp. 520-22). Any one of these is called a "condition" (*shart*). Thus the efficiency of the cause is itself determined by positive (the availability of external factors) and negative (the absence of an obstacle) circumstances, and the determinism of peripatetic doctrine is considerably moderated.

So the order of existence is a cause-and-effect sequence. In this order, beings are ranked in many respects. First, there is a unity-multiplicity order. The foundation of the sequence, the First Necessary-by-Itself Essence is absolute unity devoid of all "aspects" (*haythiyya*) (Ibn Sina, 1958, Pt 3, pp. 612-13). Since one cause brings about only one effect, while a multiplicity of effects is due to the diversity of a cause's "aspects," the Second being is also a unity. Multiplicity begins with the third member of the sequence and steadily increases further on. Causes are ranked logically and chronologically (as already mentioned), but also axiologically: what is placed "before," is more elevated and noble than what is "postponed." Thus effects are always inferior to their causes and deficient as compared to them. It is impossible to imagine, Ibn Sina writes, that the inferior might serve as the cause for that which is superior, better and more noble (Ibn Sina, 1958, Pt 3, p. 632).

The doctrine of the strict linear order of causes-and-effects, elaborated in Islamic peripatetism, became a sort of axiomatic teaching for Isma'ili thinkers and the philosophers of "illumination" (*ishraq*). Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani, the most important of Isma'ili philosophers, considers it an unquestionable rule that needs no proof (al-Kirmani, 1983, p. 130). Causality is universal: the "existence of any being is dependent on the fixity of the preceding cause: if it had not been established, its effect would not have existed." The cause-and-effect sequence ascends up to its foundation, for the existence of which the mere existence of its effects provides sufficient evidence (al-Kirmani, 1983, pp. 158-9).

[499] But unlike the Aristotelians (and, in this respect, the Mutakallimun as well), al-Kirmani sees no possibility of identifying the basis of the cause-and-effect sequence as the Divine essence. Any proposition about God, al-Kirmani argues, implies the duality of His essence rather than its unity. For

example, if we describe God as Perfect, we imply that His perfection is one thing, while the "bearer" (*hamil*) of perfection has to be something else. The same line of reasoning, of course, applies to any other attribute of His that we may consider, including existence. But as an unshakable and *a priori* law suggests, duality is always preceded by unity. Thus any proposition about God (even a proposition of negative theology, since al-Kirmani contends that the "particle 'no' has no power to deny His attributes") describes Him not only as cause, but as effect as well, which is absurd. It is noteworthy that al-Kirmani, in contending that God *cannot* be the basis of universal cause-and-effect relations, employs the same terms that Ibn Sina uses to describe what is the First Cause in his doctrine (that is, that it has nothing equal to it (*nidd*), nothing opposite to it (*didd*), no genus, no specific difference, and so on - see al-Kirmani, 1983, pp. 135-54; Ibn Sina, 1958, Pt 3, pp. 480-1).

According to al-Kirmani, then, the cause-and-effect sequence is opened not by the Divine essence, but by the First Intellect. The First Intellect is created by God from nothing and with the help of nothing, so that it is impossible to know how it was created. The First Intellect is "the first limit and the first cause to which the existence of all other beings is bound" (al-Kirmani, 1983, p. 155). The creation of the first cause is the only irrational act of God that al-Kirmani is compelled to admit, all further development of the cause-and-effect sequence being logically determined and explicable with the aid of Aristotelian terminology.

Since al-Kirmani refuses to acknowledge that the foundation of the cause-and-effect sequence possesses in itself sufficient basis for its existence, he cannot make good use of the system of the classification of beings elaborated by the peripatetics. Since the existence of the First Intellect does not follow from its essence (its created character guarantees that), no being is necessary-by-itself, a fact which deprives the complementary concept of "possible being" of its efficiency as a philosophical concept. In fact, al-Kirmani prefers to use the term *mutawallidat* - or [beings] produced from [elements] - rather than *mumkinat* - or possible [beings].

Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi, the great philosopher of "illumination" (*ishraq*), criticizes the peripatetic assertion that an effect may cease to be despite the continuation of its cause, which allowed them to explain why the sublunar world constantly changes although its celestial causes are everlasting, and argues that a cause must be understood as composite rather than simple, so that when some parts of it vanish (and those might well be of terrestrial, not celestial origin), its act ceases (al-Suhrawardi, 1952, p. 91). Since a cause is composite, the cause-and-effect sequence does not necessarily bring about a steadily increasing multiplicity of effects, as the peripatetics and Isma'ili theoreticians maintained. One part of a composite cause may bring about a simple effect, al-Suhrawardi argues (1952. pp. 94-5). What steadily increases is the meanness and degradation of beings. The cause-and-effect sequence, for al-Suhrawardi, is still linear and irreversible, and its foundation is the Everlasting Divine essence (al-Suhrawardi, 1952. pp. 91-2, [500] 121-2). In his metaphysics of light and

darkness, it is the living light, and not dead bodily substances, that serve as actual - that is. acting and creative - causes (al-Suhrawardi, 1952, pp. 109-10).

The teachings discussed so far all adhere to the linear conception of causality (with the exception, perhaps, of some of the Mutakallimun). In Sufi philosophical teachings this concept is abandoned altogether. These teachings incorporate some Kalamitic ideas and revive certain aspects of the peripatetic doctrines. The Sufi concept of causality is rather singular and at the same time is immediately associated with the basic principles of Sufi philosophy. We will outline it by contrasting it with the concept of linear causality.

The sequence of numbers provides a standard illustration of the concept of linear causality. Each number can exist only after the preceding number has gained existence, and all of them take root in the number "one," which is their foundation. One opens the sequence, regardless of whether it belongs to the sequence or not (this question was not agreed upon in medieval Islamic thought), and sets its direction: numbers increase as new ones are added to them.

This picture is transformed as follows in illustrating the Sufi concept of causality. "From One appeared the numbers in known degrees. Thus the One gave birth to numbers, and numbers split and fractured the One," according to Ibn 'Arabi, the most outstanding Sufi thinker (Ibn 'Arabi, 1980, p. 77). He positions the sequence of numbers *inside* its foundation - inside the One. Thus the foundation becomes all-encompassing and all-inclusive, as each member of the sequence is thoroughly contained within the One. and yet at the same time. as a sum of ones, transcends the One by virtue of its multiplicity. The foundation of the sequence, the One, is arithmetically speaking, equal to any of the ones from which the numbers are composed, so that the One is its own part, a "detail" (*fasl*) of itself, and any number inside the One is thus identical to the One itself. The same idea of the created being included within the creator is expressed by the geometrical image of a central dot and a circle drawn around it. "The universe in itself is similar to the central dot, the circle and what is there between them. The dot is God, the emptiness outside the circle is non-existence, ... and what is between the dot and the emptiness is possible being" (Ibn 'Arabi, 1859, Vol. 4, p. 275). Any dot of the circle belongs to the radius (the line connecting the circle and its center - God), and therefore is included in the center too, Ibn 'Arab! argues. Thus the circle (or image of the world) is drawn not outside, but inside its foundation (or God, First Principle), and each dot of the circle (each being of the world) is indistinguishable from its center - the circle's foundation.

As these images suggest, causality is not a relation *between* cause and effect, but an *inner* relation of an essence that may be considered, depending on the point of view, both cause and effect. The First Principle is the cause, but in one of its aspects (any number of the sequence, any dot of the circle) it is its own effect. "Reason judges that a cause cannot be the effect of what it is a cause for," but the one for whom truth is revealed in its totality sees

that a cause is "effect of its own effect, and its effect is its cause" (Ibn 'Arabi. 1980, p. 185).

[501] To provide a more theoretical exposition of the Sufi doctrine of causality, at least two fundamental theses of Sufi philosophy have to be mentioned - namely, the sameness of God and the world (or the sameness of unity and plurality) and the atomic concept of time.

According to Sufi thinkers, the Divine essence is an absolute unity "necessarily-existing-by-itself." The world, or "non-God," is an *inner* multiplicity of this unity, and in itself this multiplicity is only "possible." The division of existence into necessary-by-itself and possible (which is absolutely correct, Ibn 'Arabi maintains) is an inner distinction of the Divine essence, not a fundamental external distinction between the foundation of a sequence and the rest of its members. Absolute unity is multiplicity by virtue of inner "relations" (*idafa* - the Aristotelian category for such related concepts as "father" and "son" or "above" and "below"; the synonym *nisba* - or "correlation" - is also used). But what is related to what, if there is nothing outside the First Cause, and thus no external relation between it and anything else is possible? Paradoxically, "relation" (*idafa*) provides not a description, but the basis, for the existence of related essences in Ibn 'Arabi's philosophy.

Unity and multiplicity are the same in the Divine essence, yet some distinctions between them may be outlined. Unity is associated with eternity (*qidam*), while multiplicity is temporal (*mu'abbat*). Time consists of individual "moments" (*zaman fard*, *waqt fard*) deprived of duration. The atomic theory of not only time but space as well was outlined already by the Mutakallimun who maintained that temporal duration and spatial extension are produced by combinations of atoms devoid of duration and extension. In Ibn 'Arabi's philosophy, at each moment of time, temporal essences of the world appear as some embodiment of unity's inner relations and then disappear, dissolving in absolute eternal unity; this "then" (*thumma*). Ibn 'Arabi argues, denotes only logical, not chronological sequence, for the appearance and disappearance of being are the same in a temporal atom. Each such act of existence and destruction is a certain "manifestation" (*tajalli*) of unity as plurality.

If follows from this theory, usually referred to by the Qur'anic term "new creation" (*khalq jadid*), that two consequent temporal states of the world are not related to each other as cause and effect. Each further state of the world is defined not by the preceding one, but by the way in which the inner relations of Divine unity will be embodied in the given moment. Cause-and-effect relations are *renewed* (they start *anew*) at each moment of time. They are in fact eternity-to-time relations: each essence, considered in its temporality, is effect, but regarded as an unmanifested inner correlation of Divinity, is cause. The situation can be described in terms of rigid determinism: There is no escape from the action of causes, Ibn 'Arabi writes. for what *is*, never exists *without* its cause - precisely because cause and effect are one. But this is only *a* description, for one can equally maintain that since a cause is nothing other than its effect, the latter completely determines itself and is consequently free. Furthermore, the

concept of a temporal cause-and-effect sequence is denied altogether: what we take as development defined by a certain regularity, is no more than a semblance that may be violated at *any* moment of time. [502] ("A miracle happened," people would then say.) A cause is never "the same," no cause-and-effect pattern can ever be reproduced, and thus no inquiry into causal laws as fixed and ever-repeated relations is possible.

This doctrine denies the possibility of influencing the future, and so it nullifies the grounds of ethical reasoning and of a person's responsibility. It is important, however, not to fall into the error of drawing this conclusion in its absolute form, which Ibn `Arabi himself warns us against, for it is only *a* step to be followed by other steps, only a moment in the circular quest for truth. A person him- or herself is nothing less than an aspect of the Divine, being his or her own cause at any moment in time, and this means that the future, although not defined by a person's past, is nevertheless defined by no one other than him- or herself. Rigid determinism, as denied by Ibn `Arabi, does not give way to indeterminism: it is replaced rather by an assertion of the impossibility of distinguishing between cause and effect.

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