A Companion to World Philosophies

Blackwell
Companions to
Philosophy

A Companion to World Philosophies

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BLACKWELL
Publishers

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First published 1997

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Blackwell Publishers Inc.
350 Main Street
Malden, Massachusetts 02148
USA

Blackwell Publishers Ltd
108 Cowley Road
Oxford OX4 1JF
UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A companion to world philosophies / edited by Eliot Deutsch and Ron Bontekoe.
p. cm. – (Blackwell companions to philosophy)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-631-19871-7 (hardcover: alk. paper)
1. Philosophy, Oriental. 2. Philosophy, African. I. Deutsch, Eliot. II. Bontekoe, Ronald, 1954– . III. Series.
B121.C664 1997
109 – dc20 96-36179
CIP

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10$^1/_2$ on 12$^1/_2$pt Photina
by Best-set Typesetter Ltd, Hong Kong
Printed in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

This book is printed on acid-free paper

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Causality and Islamic thought

ANDREY SMIRNOV

The great disputants within the Islamic tradition, the Mutakallimūn, 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 Mutakallimūn 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 Ẓāhiriyya, "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 Mutakallimūn provided an opportunity for such analysis.

This does not mean, however, that the Mutakallimūn carried out the task to the full. The term "cause" (*ʿilla, sabab*), as well as its derivatives ("causality" – *ʿilliyya*, "to give reason" – *iʿtalla*), are too scarcely met in their writings. One would rather maintain that the Mutakallimūn 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 Qurānic idea of the absolute Divine will. Without denying the Divine will and creativity as the last foundation of existence, the Mutakallimūn nonetheless introduced *logical* restrictions on it. They did so while disputing the "permissibility" (*jiwāz*) and "impossibility" (*iḥāla*) or certain acts, including acts of God, and establishing these on logical grounds. The rational arguments here sometimes outweighed even Qurānic evidence.

According to the Mutakallimūn, 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 allāh*) or "besides-God" (*mā siwā allāh*). 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.

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

One of the prominent Mutakallimūn, Abū al-Hudhail al-ʿAllāf, argued that any act – including Divine creation – must necessarily be based upon some reasonable foundation. People were created for their own "benefit" (*manfaʿa*); otherwise, for al-ʿAllāf, Divine creation makes no sense (al-Ashʿarī, 1980, p. 252). Another well known Mutakallim, Muʿtamar, 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 (*ghāya*). For al-Naẓẓām, "formation" (*takawwun*) itself serves as sufficient reason for creation. Thus he introduced, as al-Ashʿarī wrote, the concept of final cause (*gharaḍ*) (al-Ashʿarī, 1980, p. 470). Finally, some Mutakallimūn argued that the world was created for no reason at all.

Is there any rational basis, reason and cause (*ʿilla*) for what is prescribed and what is prohibited by Revealed Law? Radical rationalists among the Mutakallimūn argued that every prescription has its cause. Moreover, any new norm of law (*farʿ*) can be established only after it has been co-measured (*qiyās*; see also Article 32, TRUTH AND ISLAMIC THOUGHT) with these causes, so that the causes "are continuous" (*iṭṭirād*) 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 Mutakallimūn could not help saying the opposite, arguing that there is no cause besides God's will for any prescription of Revealed Law (al-Ashʿarī, 1980, p. 470).

Another question in connection with which causality was discussed in Kalām 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" (*Jawāhir*) and "accidents" (*ʿawāriḍ*), which most Mutakallimūn 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" (*ḥāl*) 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 Mutakallimūn 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" (*istiḥqāq*) 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 Mutakallimūn 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 *maʿnā* ("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" (*maʿnā al-ḥarakiyya*) in that body. The Ashʿarite school later expressed this as a general rule: "Any change of attribute (*wasf*) in being is due to some meaning (*maʿnā*) that takes place in it" (al-Baghdādī, 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 Mutakallimūn 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 Mutakallimūn argued that *maʿnā* explains the existence of an accident while itself existing for no reason. But the decision to half 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 Mutakallimūn, 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" (*kumūn wa ẓuhūr*) 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 Ashʿarite school of late Kalām 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" (*ḥudūth*), 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-Baghdādī, 1981, p. 56).

But what are cause (*ʿilla*) and effect (*maʿlūl*) as such? On the whole, the Mutakallimūn gave two contrary definitions of these concepts: first, a cause is a thing that *precedes* its effect (a cause never exists "together" (*maʿa*) with its effect);

and , second, a cause is always *together* (*maʿa*) with its effect, since nothing that can precede the thing may be its cause. Al-Naẓẓām acknowledged both possibilities, and added to the list the concept of a final cause (*gharaḍ*) 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-Ashʿarī, 1980, p. 391).

Furthermore, the Mutakallimūn distinguished causes of which the effects are "necessary" and "inevitable" (*ʿillat iḍṭirār, ʿījāb*) – 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 (*ʿillat ikhtiyār*), like religious prescriptions that are observed or not according to one's will and which later cause one's punishment or reward (al-Ashʿarī, 1980, pp. 389–91).

Triumphant Aristotelianism did not silence altogether the free debates of the Mutakallimūn (which may well be compared in this respect to pre-Socratic philosophizing), but it provided unequivocal and indisputable answers to those questions that the Kalām 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" (*tartīb*; *ḍabṭ*). 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 Sīnā says, and no two things necessarily presuppose each other (Ibn Sīnā, 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 Sīnā, 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-dhāt*). 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" (*taʾakhkhur*) lie at the core of the doctrine of strict linear causality.

It is most typical for Ibn Sīnā, both in logic and in metaphysics, to draw a distinction between essence (*dhāt*) and existence (*wujūd*). This distinction, of course, is paralleled, although not in every respect, by medieval Western philosophers. The chief aim of Ibn Sīnā 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 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 Sīnā, 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 Sīnā, 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 Sīnā, 1958, Pt 3, pp. 449–55; al-Suhrawardī, 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 Sīnā, 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 (*dhāt*), regardless of everything else, either necessarily possesses existence in itself, or does not. If it does, it is true by itself (*ḥaqq bi dhāti-hi*) and necessarily exists by itself; this is the Ever-existent" (Ibn Sīnā, 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" (*awlā*) 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" (*wājib*; also *wājib al-wujūd* – "necessarily-existent"). Since its necessity has an external source and is not derived from its essence, it is "necessarily-existent-by-the-other" (*wājib al-wujūd 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 Sīnā, 1958, Pt 3, p. 522). But it should not escape our attention that Ibn Sīnā divides all causes (as did the Mutakallimūn) 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-Fārābī maintains, not only necessary, but also contingent (*ittifāqiyya*) 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-Farābī'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-Fārābī, 1890, p. 110). Ibn Sīnā argues that a cause has to be in an appropriate "state" (*ḥāl*) 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 Mutakallimūn, 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 Sīnā, 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 Sīnā, 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 Sīnā, 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" (*ḥāl*) 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" (*mānī'*) to the fulfillment of the action (Ibn Sīnā, 1958, Pt 3, pp. 520–22). Any one of these is called a "condition" (*sharṭ*). 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" (*ḥaythiyya*) (Ibn Sīnā, 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 Sīnā writes, that the inferior might serve as the cause for that which is superior, better and more noble (Ibn Sīnā, 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 Ismā'īli thinkers and the philosophers of "illumination" (*ishrāq*). Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, the most important of Ismā'īli philosophers, considers it an unquestionable rule that needs no proof (al-Kirmānī, 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-Kirmānī, 1983, pp. 158–9).

But unlike the Aristotelians (and, in this respect, the Mutakallimūn as well), al-Kirmānī sees no possibility of identifying the basis of the cause-and-effect sequence as the Divine essence. Any proposition about God, al-Kirmānī 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" (*ḥāmil*) 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-Kirmānī 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-Kirmānī, in contending that God *cannot* be the basis of universal cause-and-effect relations, employs the same terms that Ibn Sīnā 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 (*ḍidd*), no genus, no specific difference, and so on – see al-Kirmānī, 1983, pp. 135–54; Ibn Sīnā, 1958, Pt 3, pp. 480–1).

According to al-Kirmānī, 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-Kirmānī, 1983, p. 155). The creation of the first cause is the only irrational act of God that al-Kirmānī 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-Kirmānī 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-Kirmānī prefers to use the term *mutawallidāt* – or [beings] produced from [elements] – rather than *mumkināt* – or possible [beings].

Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī, the great philosopher of "illumination" (*ishrāq*), 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-Suhrawardī, 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 Ismāʿīli theoreticians maintained. One part of a composite cause may bring about a simple effect, al-Suhrawardī argues (1952, pp. 94–5). What steadily increases is the meanness and degradation of beings. The cause-and-effect sequence, for al-Suhrawardī, is still linear and irreversible, and its foundation is the Everlasting Divine essence (al-Suhrawardī, 1952, pp. 91–2, 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-Suhrawardī, 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 Mutakallimūn). In Ṣūfī philosophical teachings this concept is abandoned altogether. These teachings incorporate some Kalāmic ideas and revive certain aspects of the peripatetic doctrines. The Ṣūfī concept of causality is rather singular and at the same time is immediately associated with the basic principles of Ṣūfī 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 Ṣūfī 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 ʿArabī, the most outstanding Ṣūfī thinker (Ibn ʿArabī, 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" (*faṣl*) 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 ʿArabī, 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 ʿArabī 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 ʿArabī, 1980, p. 185).

To provide a more theoretical exposition of the Sūfī doctrine of causality, at least two fundamental theses of Sūfī 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 Sūfī 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 ʿArabī 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" (*iḍāfa* – 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" (*iḍāfa*) provides not a description, but the basis, for the existence of related essences in Ibn ʿArabī'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 (*muʾaqqat*). Time consists of individual "moments" (*zamān fard, waqt fard*) deprived of duration. The atomic theory of not only time but space as well was outlined already by the Mutakallimūn who maintained that temporal duration and spatial extension are produced by combinations of atoms devoid of duration and extension. In Ibn ʿArabī'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 ʿArabī 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" (*tajallī*) of unity as plurality.

If follows from this theory, usually referred to by the Qurʾānic term "new creation" (*khalq jadīd*), 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 ʿArabī 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. ("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 ʿArabī 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 ʿArabī, 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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