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Mutazilites and Asharites on Causation and the Nature of the Physical World

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Abstract

History of medieval Muslim philosophy is bound up with the concept of God, the nature of the physical world and the relation between them. The concept of causation, a related issue, remained one of the most debatable and burning issues among different Muslim schools of thought. This article discusses the Theory of Causation with special reference to Mutazilites and Asharites. They both focused on the relation of God with world and the nature of the physical world. Causal relation, according to both schools of thought, is essentially a problem of the relation between God and the physical world. We argue: although both schools claim to derive their philosophy related to causation from theology, faith and reason but presented very different views of causation. Mutazilites, assert causality and the necessity of nature, attempted to prove an independent existence of the physical world with no intervention from God. Asharites, on the other hand, denied the existence of such nature as causal necessity tried to prove the continuous creation of the physical world with free intervention of God.

Key Words

Mutazilites, Asharites, Causation, Physical World, Atomism, Agency, Creation, Occasionalism, Free Will.

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Introduction

Theory of Causation has been an important issue in philosophy. Causation is a relation between two events/ circumstances /processes/ objects, where one (Cause) makes the other (Effect) happen. Very many philosophers have discussed different issues related to causation such as: meaning of the word cause; types of causes; uniformity in nature; methods of connecting cause with effect; fallacies related to causation; and causal diagrams and networks. Some philosophers, Hume and Al Ghazali, argued that the relationship between cause and effect is not real (Syed Jawad Ali Shah & Shuja Ahmad, 2021). However, other philosophers believe that the causal relationship is real and there are different methods to connect cause with effect.

In the medieval philosophy, philosophers and different schools of thought attempted to explain the world using both intellect and faith. Medieval Muslim philosophers utilized religion and faith in all kinds of philosophical inquiries.

This article discusses the Theory of Causation with special reference to Mutazilites and Asharites. They both focused on the relation of God with world and the nature of the physical world. Causal relation according to these schools of thought is essentially a problem of the relation between God and physical world— however, they argued about the nature of the physical world differently; hence, have different views of causation. The article mainly focuses on their arguments related to the relation of God with the physical world and the nature of the physical world. We argue: Although both schools claim to derive their philosophy related to causation from faith. Theology and reason but presented very different views of causation. Mutazilites assert causality and the necessity of nature and attempted to prove the independent existence of the physical world with no intervention from God. Asharites denied the existence of such nature as causal necessity and tried to prove the continuous creation of physical world with the free intervention of God.

Mutazilites on Causation

Mutazilites, being one of the most noteworthy Muslim theological schools, was founded at Basra in the 8th century by Wasil bin Ata. Their understanding of causality is related to ‘divine action’. To understand their concept of causation, we must distinguish between moral causation and natural causation. Moral causation is man’s determination of his own actions—that is his freedom to choose and do what he desires. Man creates/causes his own actions by willing them freely. God only give him the capacity to perform the action he wills; however, God does not perform the action. According to Mutazilites, moral causation is based on the idea of divine justice and man’s responsibility. Mutazilites believed that God is essentially just and good. God does not cause or determine actions of man for two reasons: firstly, man’s actions may be good or bad. If God is the author of actions, then God may be the author of something bad, which is impossible. Secondly, man is the cause of his actions, because he is responsible for his actions. If man is not the author of his actions, then God would be unjust in holding him responsible for something he has not done, and this is likewise not possible. Therefore, responsibility of man implies freedom, and freedom implies that man is the author of his actions (Boer, 1967). We can conclude that we

do actions without God's intervention; therefore, we are responsible for our actions- God provides capacity to perform actions though.

Mutazilites are closer to deterministic understanding of causation. Mutazilites' concept of natural causation is based on their theories of nonbeing (privation), bodies, substances (atoms), and accidents. For Mutazilites, the idea of privation is not equivalent to nothingness nor opposite to being; it is the potential state of a thing prior to its coming-into-being; hence, privation refers to some 'thing', though this thing may not be existing. According to them, the characteristics of existence can be predicated to privation as a thing—which is attributed to substances and accidents (Al-Shahrastani, 1984). Privation is the essence of objects which precedes their existence. It is eternal in itself as a kind of potentiality capable of changing into actuality, and it is God Who effects its change. God gives objects their existence, not their essence (Nadir, 1950). According to Mutazilites, Object has essential qualities before it exists and that these qualities persist after the object is made to exist by God. These qualities are necessarily inherent in the object independently of God and constitute the essence of the object. There is a kind of material determinism in the physical world; a determinism that rules out any divine intervention. Therefore, objects are causally connected to one another. When a stone falls to the ground, it does not fall freely but necessarily in obedience to the law inherent in stone (Al-Shahrastani, 1984).

According to the Latency Theory of Al-Nazzam, everything was created at the beginning once and endowed with distinctive qualities. Objects are "latent" in one another and they unfold themselves in time through a natural process. Through the process of growth the seed develops into a tree, i.e., the process of growth actualizes the tree and brings it forth from the state of latency to the state of existence (Al-Shahrastani, 1984). According to a necessary natural causal law the process of actualization of the latent action is essential for the physical world (Nadir, 1950).

Mutazilites view of substances and accidents contains an element of causal connection. Accidents that inhere in a certain body are not created by God, but are produced by the particular body in which they inhere. Indivisible substances are inseparable from the accidents they contain; their essences consist in their integration. Accidents are directly associated with substances. Thus it is physical bodies that produce their own accidents. God has nothing to do with this phenomenon. God has only created physical bodies; accidents are the products of these bodies without intervention of God. Accidents exist either by necessity of the nature of the bodies or by freely and voluntarily moving of the body in the physical world (Al-Shahrastani, 1984).

According to Mutazilites, objects cannot change into their opposites. The active force of natural agents operates according to a law which God Himself cannot alter once set by Him (Nadir, 1950). An object which produces something once can produce it always, unless it loses its essence, "Same cause produces the same effect under the same circumstances" (Nadir, 1950, p. 204). Some Mutazilites believed that there are three kinds of causes: cause precedes effect (one event come after another event in a well determined manner); cause is simultaneous with effect (one event come with another event as shadow in relation to object); and cause proceeds from

or come after effect (final cause: end goal for being). However, others argue that there is only one kind of cause that it must come before effect (Al-Shahrastani, 1984).

Mutazilites further classified causes into direct and indirect (generated) causes: any event that occurs with premeditated intention and a determined will is a direct cause. Intention and will are the conditions of a direct cause—it is subject to the action of the will. Therefore, direct cause is the real cause of its effect. On the other hand, any event that occurs without intention and will is a generated cause. The generated events are determined, because they are subject to necessary laws of nature which are outside the will and capacity of man. Man is also responsible for generated events as well because man is the first cause—who set them motion (Nadir, 1950).

This discussion reveals that God is the creator of the physical world, the capacities and potentialities in objects and bodies and the natural laws—however, cannot interfere in the accidents. In order to safeguard the justice of God, Mutazilites rejected the idea of divine interference in human actions and in the physical world. It is on this account that they were called the “people of justice” (Sharif, 1963).

Asharites on Causation

Asharites is the most outstanding Sunni Islamic theological school which was named after its founding theologian Al-Ashari. It emerged originally as a reaction to the excessive rationalism of Mutazilites. The ideas of Asharites on causality depend mostly on arguments forwarded by Al-Baqillani and Al-Juwayni. Omnipotence of God and the creation of the universe have a crucial place in Asharites perspective on causality. By denying causality principle, Asharites relate the order of the universe to the manifestation of God’s will. According to Majid Fakhry, they have an Occasionalistic view rather than a deterministic one. Asharites concept of God, as an omnipotent sovereign, determined their physical and moral theories (Fakhry, 1958). God created the physical world for the very first time from nothing and capable to recreates it again (Al-Ashari, 1953).

According to Asharites, privation is referring to nothing at all, to utter annihilation. Privation is opposite to being. If an object has being, it exists. Conversely, if an object has privation, it does not exist. Existence is not an act of actualizing the potential state of privation but a total new creation. There is no inherent essence as such in objects prior to their existence. God creates objects and in the act of creation, objects become what they are. The physical world depends upon God for its existence (Wolfson, 1976).

Asharites believed that God’s essence and attributes are absolutely unknowable. Pure reason can know that God is, but it cannot know how and what He is—it can posit His existence, not His essence. To know God’s essence, reason needs the aid of revelation; revelation should be taken literally without any interpretation. Revelation, for Asharites, is the torch which kindles the way of man to all possible knowledge in the world. Asharites’ physical theories deeply rooted in their theology—God is an Absolute Being; any attribute predicated of Him must be absolute. Therefore, He is absolutely free, absolutely capable, omnipotent and omniscient (Pines, 1997). According to Asharites conception of atomism, the World and everything in it is made of atoms. Atoms are created, produced or annihilated by God. They are momentary. They come from vacuum. Even space and time have atoms. Atoms are ideal and non-material. Substance and

qualities are completely dependent upon one another. Substance is the mixture of qualities. Atoms are not extended in space. In this sense, God is neither a substance nor a quality because both are dependent and are mortal; whereas, God is one, unique and immortal reality. For them matter has no permanent potentialities. Potentiality is a quality which is given to matter by our mind and is purely subjective and it has nothing to do with existence (Sharif, 1963).

According to Al-Baqillani, the world is composed of three categories: bodies, atoms (substances) and accidents. Everything which exists, from human actions to physical objects, must belong to one of these three categories of being (Altaie, 2006). Substances are at the basis of everything and are indivisible; they make up any existing entity in the universe (Maimonides, 2002). Bodies are no more than aggregates of these substances, as individual substances in themselves have no magnitude. Every substance possesses a series of accidents or temporary qualities. The indivisibility of substance is fundamental to the theory, as without substance the physical entities could not form (MacDonald, 1927).

According to Asharites, accidents are non-permanent and they exist for one instant only. An accident perishes as soon as it is created, and is recreated anew as long as God wishes the objects to continue to exist in the same state. God performs the act of continuous creation and recreation of accidents and accidents cannot exist without substances. By recreating accidents God also recreates the substances alongside with them. God maintains the existence of the world by continuously creating it, and annihilation of the world result in non-existence (Maimonides, 2002).

Accidents, according to Asharites, are created, destroyed and then recreated by the will of God; they need not be the same every time they are created. An accident in a certain body is not a necessary but a contingent quality. The “contingency of being” shows that everything is rationally possible for God. Uniformity in the physical world is no more than the habitual uniformity of the succession of accidents of that object (MacDonald, 1927). The denial of certain active nature was the reason for Asharites’ assertion that an accident exists for one moment only, and God recreates it in every successive instant of its being. God performs this recreation voluntarily; this so-called certain nature of an object in the physical world can be altered at any time depending on His Will. God wills that events should occur according to a certain habit, which is maintained by God (Maimonides, 2002). Asharites denial of causation is based on some metaphysical assumption which involves denial of effective and certain nature in things.

Al-Baqillani put forth four arguments against the existence of natural qualities in objects (Davidson, 1968). The first argument is theological and is directed against Mutazilites who argue that the world has resulted from the action of a natural cause inherent in the world. If the natural cause is uncreated then the effect (world) must also be uncreated without any lapse of time. So long as there is a cause there is an effect. But it has been shown that the world is not uncreated, nor the natural cause of the world. On the other hand, if the natural cause is created by a similar cause, then it will be created by another cause and so on, which is impossible. But if the world is not created by the similar cause, then it can be inferred that the world is not a product of the natural agent. His second argument is based on distinction between bodies and accidents. When an event causes another event because of its nature, then the nature will be either in the thing

itself or accident other than itself. If the thing in itself is the effective nature, then any other thing or body must produce the same effect which cannot be verified through experience. If nature is an accident, then still it cannot be effective (Abrahamov, 1988). Because accidents exist for one moment while an action needs long duration. In his third argument, Al-Baqillani attacked the defenders of causation. He argues that this is disproved by experiences that causes are directly proportional to effects, because the increase of cause does not necessitate the increase of its effect. In his last argument, he emphasizes that we only perceive the change in the state of a body but do not perceive causes of the change. The real cause of change in the state of a body is God, and not the natural cause (Altaie, 2006), (Davidson, 1968).

Another important representative of Asharites is Imamul Haramyn al-Juwayni, who had great influence on Al-Ghazali and his thoughts related to causation (Davidson, 1968). Juwayni rejected the idea of necessary causality considering the omnipotence and will of God. He states that the order of natural phenomena is a direct result of divine knowledge and depends on the natural laws given by God. The relation between two things and events is manifestations of divine will; hence, there is no ontological necessity between two natural phenomena (Al-Juwayni, 2001). Similarly, Al-Ma'sumi argues, there is no power except the power of God and actions of man are, therefore, His creation (Al-Ma'sumi, 1963).

They contend that the ability of an antecedent to cause the consequent is not possible without God's will. The phenomenal order is predetermined by God, and all we know are just floating impressions of it (Shibli, 1939).

In short, Asharites view of causation in physical world is rooted in their belief in atomism and the continuous recreation of accidents. God creates/recreates accidents and motion continuously with a certain pattern that is assigned by God, that we may call habit. The creation of motion and accidents are not due to causal connection but rather habit.

Conclusion

Mutazilites and Asharites are two important schools of Islamic theology that emerged during the 8th and 9th centuries. Although they both utilize religion and faith in explaining different theological and philosophical issues, they had opposing viewpoints, including the conception of natural causality. They both advocate their own philosophico-religious thought to defend themselves against each other. Mutazilites adopted rationalistic position while Asharites adopted intermediate position

Mutazilites were exponents of the concept of natural causality, also known as "cause and effect". They believed that all events and phenomena in the natural world were caused by God, but that these causes operate through natural laws that were independent of God's direct intervention; God is the creator of these natural laws of the physical world though. God created these laws and then allowed the physical world to operate according to set laws. They argued that any direct intervention by God in the laws made by Himself would be injustice.

Asharites, on the contrary, denied the concept of natural causality. They affirmed that all events and phenomena in the physical world are directly caused by God's will and intervention. According to the Asharites, God, as Omnipotent, is directly responsible for everything (moderation, alteration, creation, suspension etc.) that happens in the physical world, and there

are no natural laws that operate independent of God's will. Asharites rely on causality to allow miracles. For Asharites that reliance was problematic, since they shift causation from the horizontal (natural) to the vertical (occasional) plane. Al- Ghazali in the 11th Century denied any necessary relation between cause and effect and constructed his argument to justify miracles. For them creation of the universe is not an accidental or self-caused object, because it is created and sustained by God in a very planned manner, and He intervenes in this natural order when He wills.

Asharites opine that the necessary causal relation between two events is mere illusion which is created by human mind; otherwise, there is extreme individuality in each event. The affirmation, negation, existence and non-existence of one does not imply the affirmation, negation, existence and non-existence of the other.

The difference in their perspectives with respect to the concept of causation has implications for a range of theological issues, including inquiry concerning the nature of God, the relationship between God and the physical world, and the role of human agency in the world. The debate between the Mutazilites and Asharites has an important significance in the development of Islamic theology, philosophy of science and their ideas continued to be studied and debated by scholars today.

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