



Causality in the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika School

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Causality implies a host of philosophic problems which are pertinent to different branches of philosophical studies. My aim here is, however, a modest one. While explaining the notion of cause as it was understood by different philosophical schools of classical India, I shall try to show that (a) concern for the notion of causation was taken more seriously in some Indian philosophical schools than it had been in some of their Western counterparts, and (b) that the meaning of 'cause' (*kāraṇa*) is much wider in Indian philosophy than it is in the West.

To substantiate the second point first, I shall first very briefly refer to the classification of 'causal conditions' as found in the *Abhidharmakośa* of Vasubandhu and then to another classification found in the Vaiśeṣika school. Two different terms, *hetu* and *pratyaya*, are used to cover all causal notions in the Abhidharma system. There is, however, no essential difference between these two concepts, the six types of *hetu* being included under the broader notion of *pratyaya*.

The *Abhidharmakośa* first explains six types of *hetu*, of which the first is called the *kāraṇa-hetu*, the 'prototype' of a *hetu*. The definition of a *kāraṇa-hetu* reflects the attitude of the Abhidharma school toward the general notion of cause. In fact, to be a cause in this sense means to exist without being a 'hindrance' (*viḥna*) to the production of the effect in question. Thus, if *x* is a *dharma* that originates, then any *dharma* other than the 'own-being' (*svabhāva*) of it may be called its *kāraṇa-hetu*.¹

Four types of *pratyaya* are: (1) *hetu-pratyaya*, (2) *ālambana-pratyaya*, (3) *samanantara-pratyaya*, and (4) *adhipati-pratyaya*. Of these, the first includes the 'remaining' five *hetus* in the foregoing classification while the last includes the 'prototype', that is, the *kāraṇa-hetu*.² The second and the third are found useful only with regard to the states of consciousness. The *ālambana* is the 'causal basis', that is, the object, of a particular state of consciousness which is regarded as an effect or event. The *samanantara* is the 'causal precedent', that is, the preceding moment of consciousness conditioning the succeeding moment. It should also be mentioned that in the remaining five *hetus* (a discussion of which I will skip here) of the six types mentioned earlier are included *hetus* like a *sahabhū hetu*, where two *dharmas* originating simultaneously are said to mutually condition each other.

This breathtaking classification of the *Abhidharma* will be enough to show *hetu* or 'cause' is being used here in its widest possible sense. It is sometimes pointed out that we should not probably translate *hetu* or *kāraṇa* in this context as a 'cause' or a 'causal condition'. But I am in favor of retaining such translations simply because such terms as '*hetu*' and '*pratyaya*' mean almost the same thing (and, by the same token, share the same ambiguity) in ordinary Sanskrit

as terms like 'cause' and 'causal condition' do in ordinary English. It is a philosopher's privilege to use an ordinary term in a highly specialized sense.

If to cause an effect in the *Abhidharma* means not to obstruct the production of that effect (that is, that *dharma*), to cause an effect in the Vaiśeṣika system means to be its immediate (and 'unconditional') antecedent. The Vaiśeṣikas speak of a causal substrate or a 'substantial' cause (*samavāyikāraṇa*) which is the substance where the effect occurs (through the relation of inherence). Ordinarily, this is the material cause of an effect, even comparable to the 'material' cause in the fourfold division of Aristotle. But strictly speaking, this is a wider notion in the Vaiśeṣika system, since such 'nonmaterial' substances as the soul and the physical space are said to be causal substrates of suitable effects. For example, a state of consciousness as an event is said to occur in the soul (that is, the person) which is its causal substrate.

All causal conditions other than the causal substrate that are relevant to the effect are classified by the Vaiśeṣikas into two groups: *asamavāyin* cause (non-substantial, literally 'noninherent' cause), and the *nimitta* 'efficient' cause. The former forms an artificial group which includes only qualities (and relational qualities like 'conjunction' *saṃyoga*) that *inhere* in the causal substrate and are causally relevant to the effect.³ For example, color of the threads causes the color of the cloth, or conjunction of different parts of a table causes the table in this manner. The group of 'efficient' cause includes everything else that is causally relevant to the effect in question. Thus, the potter, along with the potter's wheel, rod, water, etc., is called the 'efficient' cause of the effect, pot. Aristotle's notion of the 'efficient' cause, in a liberal interpretation, can match this Vaiśeṣika notion. But nothing like Aristotle's notion of the 'final' cause or the 'formal' cause can be found in the Indian schools.⁴

The distinction of a 'nonsubstantial' cause from the group of efficient causes seems to be artificial. It was probably based upon the awareness that as long as the effect, the color of a cloth, exists its 'nonsubstantial' cause (that is, the color of the threads) should, like the causal substrate, also exist. But an 'efficient' cause like the potter's wheel may wither away (after the effect is born) without affecting the effect in any way. In other words, the father may die after the son is born, but what inheres in the son's body and limbs must stay as long as the son is alive.⁵ A notion parallel to that of a 'nonsubstantial' cause of the Vaiśeṣikas is hard to find in the Western tradition.

Concern for a causal notion was fundamental in almost all schools of Indian philosophy. We should remember that philosophic activity in India arose out of the cosmogonic speculations of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads. The all important business of philosophy was to attempt to discover some simple, unitary cause for the origin of this complex universe. Various alternative theories were propounded from the very early period, as is well evidenced in the passages of the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, and in the *Nyāyasūtra*, chapter 4.⁶ Some of the main views about the original cause of the universe were: (a) time,

(b) nature or 'own-nature', (c) *pradhāna* 'the unmanifest' matter, (d) god, (e) atoms, and (f) cyclical dependent origination. Of these, I shall briefly allude to the three important views, the Sāṃkhya, the Buddhist, and the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika views.

The earliest critique of the notion of cause is to be found in India in the *satkāryavāda* doctrine of the Sāṃkhya school, which was historically the earliest of Indian philosophic systems. The doctrine means that the so-called effect preexists in its cause, causation being merely a change of transformation from one state to another while the original 'thing' (cf. *dharmin*) remains constant and unchanging. An effect means a change in only the attributes or characteristics of the thing, a new state of affairs means manifestation of what was *potentially* present (cf., *sat*) in the early state of affairs, that is, in its so-called cause.⁷ The Sāṃkhya metaphysics posits an ultimate, original matter, the *pradhāna* or *avyakta* (the 'chief' or the 'unmanifest') from which the whole material world evolves. It is also admitted that the potential becomes actual at every moment and thus transformation of the world is automatic and instantaneous. This aspect of the Sāṃkhya theory might have influenced the Buddhist doctrine of universal flux.

The Buddha's doctrine of impermanence (*anityatā*) was developed by the later Buddhists as the doctrine of universal flux. Causation in Buddhism is spanned by its doctrine of conditioned (or dependent) origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*). In Abhidharma, for example, every *saṃskṛta dharma*, that is, every effect, is said to originate merely depending upon what is called its *pratyaya* (or *hetu*). Like the empiricist in the West, the Buddhists reduced causal dependence to nothing more than a mere sequence, a very loose relation usually expressed in the formula: if *x* is, *y* arises (cf., *asmiṃ sati idaṃ bhavati hrasve sati dīrghaṃ yathā*). The Mādhyamikas rejected the notion of *savabhāva* 'own-being' of things as well as origin (*udaya*) and decay (*vyaya*) of things (*bhāvas*).⁸ Thus, they might have paved the way for the doctrine of non-origination (*ajāti-vāda*) of Gauḍapāda.⁹ The popular belief that an effect is brought about by its causes is reduced to an absurdity by the Mādhyamika dialecticians.

The doctrine of universal flux is the result of the Buddhist rejection of the notion of *potentiality*. To be causally potent means here only actual production of the effect. Everything is in a flux, there being so stability (*sthiraṭva*). Causation is simply incessant succession of events. Unlike the Sāṃkhya, the Buddhists rejected the notion of any unchanging core of things, any unchanging *dharmin* underlying the seeming fluctuations.¹⁰

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school opposed the Sāṃkhya by its doctrine of *a-sat-kārya-vāda*, according to which an effect is a new creation, and hence numerically different, from its cause. The description of causation in this school is closer to the commonsense view of a cause. True to the spirit of empiricism, causal relation is described here also as one of invariable sequence. Udayana

asserted, in answer to the skepticism about causality, that a causal explanation of an event is needed unless we want to settle for a total accidentality or ‘whimsicality’ of everything. A particular effect happens at a particular moment, not always. This is what is called the ‘temporality’ (*kādācīkatva*) of an effect, and this temporality implies dependence of the effect upon something other than itself. Causal relation is nothing more than this obligatory dependence.¹¹

The Nyāya school rejected also the notion of *śakti*, ‘power’, ‘efficacy’ or ‘force’, connected with causation. The Mīmāṃsakas, being consistent with the common belief, argued in favor of an efficacious power or *śakti* present in the cause to produce the effect—a power which can be destroyed by the presence of an ‘antidote’ (*pratibandhaka*) and can conceivably be resuscitated by an ‘antidote to the antidote’ (cf., *uttejaka*). Thus, fire burns because of its power to burn—a power which either can be destroyed or resuscitated under suitable conditions. While refuting the notion of *śakti*, Udayana solved the problem presented by the influence of antidotes by boldly asserting that causation implies presence of not only ‘positive’ causal conditions but also of relevant ‘negative’ conditions. For a particular effect to happen, the *absence* of the relevant antidote is also needed as one of its causal conditions.¹²

The Navyanyāya treatment of causation is interesting in many ways. The notion of invariable sequence is explained as holding between generalities rather than between particular events. Thus, Śāśadhara defined a cause as one belonging to a class, individual members of which invariably precede individual members of another class, the relevant effect-class (cf., *kāryaniyatapūrvavṛttijārīyatva*).¹³ A potter’s wheel is said to be a cause of a particular pot because it belongs to the class of those wheels, members of which are *seen* to precede invariably the production of members of the pot-class. The notion of invariable sequence is, however, to be derived from experience, from what is called *anvaya* and *vyatireka* (seeing cases of association and absence).

Although in rejecting the notion of ‘efficacy’ or ‘power’ Nyāya resembled the position of David Hume, the doctrine of invariable sequence was not propounded here exactly in Humean spirit. For Hume, it is only the mind that spreads itself on external objects and conjoins them as cause and effect while nothing really exists between them to be so conjoined.¹⁴ This is more like the Buddhist view than the Nyāya view. For Nyāya, invariable sequence is discovered by the mind but it exists between extramental realities like universals or class characters. Perhaps Nyāya shuns the Humean empiricism while it asserts its doctrine of real universals. In fact, although the early Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika doctrine of universal was modified by Navyanyāya, it still maintained that certain class-characters were real in order to explain, among other things, the relation of cause and effect.¹⁵

Thus, it was felt in Navyanyāya that the criterion of invariable sequence was not enough for distinguishing causal conditions of a particular effect. For example, the production of a pot is preceded invariably not simply by the

potter's wheel but also the color and circularity of the potter's wheel. But the color of the wheel is immaterial and irrelevant to the production of the pot. To exclude such irrelevant items from being considered as causes of the particular effect in question, such Navyanyāya authors as Śāśadhara and Gaṅgeśa introduced the notion of what they called *ananyathāsiddhatva* 'unconditionality'. The invariable presence of the color of the wheel before the pot is produced is *conditioned* by the presence of the wheel itself, and hence it need not be taken into account while we consider the relevant (causal) conditions for the effect in question. By same token Navyanyāya excludes the cause of a cause from being considered as a cause of a particular effect. This takes care also of a conceivable case where each time a pot is produced on the potter's wheel, a donkey always walks by immediately before the event. Experience of invariable sequence may demand that we construe the two events as causally related. But Nyāya claims that the 'unconditionality' criterion can save the situation since it is possible to find a reasonable explanation of each case of such appearances of a donkey. If such reasonable explanation is found, the donkey's appearance will no longer be an 'unconditional' antecedent.¹⁶

If the Navyanyāya analysis of the causal relation seems to be somewhat embarrassing to a Humean empiricist, we may introduce here a brief discussion of some contemporary problems of causation. David Hume's critique of causality brought into focus two important questions in contemporary philosophy. The first question is: whether there is, after all, any necessary connection between a cause and its effect? The second, and perhaps more basic question is: whether the notion of cause is at all a viable concept in philosophy, useful for explanation and understanding of what are called 'events'?

Because of the muddle and complexity associated with the notion of 'cause', some modern philosophers (notably Bertrand Russell) despaired of making any sense of the word 'cause', and hence recommended "its complete extrusion from the philosophical vocabulary."¹⁷ The rise of modern theoretical physics, some doctrines of which throw doubt even upon the once universally acclaimed *universality principle of causation* (the principle that states, "every event must have a cause"), has contributed further to the modern despair about the notion of cause. But whatever may be the situation in theoretical and higher physics, it is almost undeniable that the concept of a cause is quite useful in the common affairs of life, in applied technology, in moral fields, in law and jurisprudence. Thus, I believe a philosopher can hardly afford to be totally indifferent to this concept. It will be enough to point out here that respectable modern philosophers such as A. J. Ayer, R. G. Collingwood, C. J. Ducasse, and G. E. van Wright, have found the concept of causality to be useful.¹⁸

Modern despair about the notion of cause can partly be ascribed to Hume's rigid demand for the empirical analysis of causation. Hume used the notion of similarity or resemblance in giving an empirical explanation of cause. A cause is defined as "an object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the

objects resembling the former are placed in a like relation of priority and contiguity to those objects, that resemble the latter.”¹⁹ Unfortunately the notion of similarity invites a number of philosophic problems in empiricism. For one thing, an event today must be similar to an event of yesterday in some *essential* respects in order to be caused by a similar cause. We may recall that Navyanyāya introduced the notion of real universals or class character. To avoid this quandary of empiricism, a follower of Hume might argue that similar effects, in order to have similar causes, must be similar only in certain *crucial* or *relevant* respects. It is, however, easy to see that the notion of such “relevance” cannot be explained without resorting to the causal notion, and thus it will involve us in a circularity.

The question of relevance may enter in the discussion of causal relation in another way. If, following Hume, the notion of necessity is completely eliminated and causation is reduced to mere invariable sequence, then, as Thomas Reid pointed out against David Hume, we will have to admit that day is the cause of night and vice versa, since day is seen to be invariably followed by night and night by day.²⁰ J. S. Mill referred to this criticism of Reid and defended Hume by introducing the notion of ‘unconditionality’ in defining the notion of cause. Mill argued as follows: “If there be any meaning which confessedly belongs to the term, it is *unconditionalness* The succession of day and night evidently is not necessary in this sense. It is conditional on the occurrence of other antecedents.”²¹ Since it is conceivable that there could be circumstances (for example, sudden stopping of the rotation of the earth) under which day will not be followed by night and vice versa, Mill said, the two are *not unconditionally* conjoined and hence not causally connected. It is unfortunate that Mill here abandoned, quite unconsciously, the very point of the empirical analysis of Hume, and reintroduced the notion of necessity disguised as ‘unconditionality’. Besides, if, as Mill explained, conceivability of the circumstances under which a known invariable sequence may not follow is enough to upset the causal connection between events, then very few events could be said to be causally connected.

Mill’s own explanation of the ‘unconditionality’ criterion was thus hardly satisfactory. However, one may justify the ‘unconditionality’ criterion in order to distinguish irrelevant antecedents from the causally relevant antecedents. But then we are thinking of what Navyanyāya calls *ananyathāsiddhatva* (which I have translated above as the criterion of ‘unconditionality’), and not Mill’s ‘unconditionality’ criterion.

The point at issue may be made in the following way. Suppose there is a unique tribe, each adult member of which has produced, after going through the usual tribal training period, a particular craft. This craft is unique to this tribe, and let us assume that no one else on earth has succeeded in producing that craft. Now suppose that each such adult member, after his training period and before producing the craft, has gotten up from bed at 6 A.M. on two succes-

sive Sundays. If invariable sequence is enough to establish causal connection, then not only the tribal training period but also their getting up at 6 A.M. on two successive Sundays should be considered causally relevant! In fact, to be true to the Humean spirit of empiricism, one has to accept such an apparently absurd consequence. The question of what is relevant, namely, the training period, and what is not relevant to the production of the craft cannot be decided unless some notion like the Navyanyāya idea of *ananyathāsiddhatva* is introduced. It may be noted that an Abhidharma Buddhist can nicely tackle the problem here by taking the bull by the horns. As noted earlier, he can claim that when something *has been* produced nothing that was prior to it was really irrelevant to its production. Vasubandhu exemplified the point as follows: When the village folk have successfully organized a feast without interference from the proverbial village troublemaker, they can say that the success of the feast was owing also to the help of that troublemaker. In other words, when an event is caused, almost everything, through its noninterference, can be causally responsible for it. Thus, the question of excluding irrelevant items from the domain of causation does not arise.

For Navyanyāya, the fact of their getting up at 6 A.M. on two Sunday mornings will be what is called *anyathāsiddha* 'conditioned otherwise', and hence it cannot be causally relevant. In other words, if we investigated each case separately, we could find in each case reasonable explanation of why that particular adult in that case got up at 6 A.M. on two successive Sunday mornings before the said craft was produced. And such an explanation would reveal that each of these facts was conditioned otherwise, *anyathāsiddha*. In the same way, Navyanyāya would declare that while being dry, that is, the lack of dampness, is a 'negative' causal condition for the matchstick to ignite, but the color of the matchstick is *anyathāsiddha*, being immaterial to its igniting.²²

NOTES

1. See *Abhidharmakośa* and *Bhāṣya* of Vasubandhu, Part I, ed. Swami Dwarikadas Sastri (Varanasi: Bauddha Bharati, 1971), pp. 279–282.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 349.

3. See *Prāśastapāda*, *Padārthadharmasamgraha*, ed. Durgadhara Jha (Varanasi: Sanskrit Visvavidyalaya, 1963), pp. 244, 246.

4. This is a general comment, which may be subject to qualification. In fact, Asok Gangadean criticized this comment. But I am yet to be convinced by his arguments.

5. For this notion of *nimittakāraṇa*, see *Vyomavatī* of Vyomaśivācārya, commentary on *Prāśastapādabhāṣya*, ed. Gopinath Kaviraj and Dhundhiraj Sastri, (Banaras: Chowkhamba, 1930), p. 140–142.

6. See *Nyāyasūtra* and *Nyāyabhāṣya*, ed. Ganganath Jha, (Poona: Oriental Book Agency, 1939), p. 246–270.

7. See *Sāṃkhyakārikā* and *Yuktiḍīpikā*, ed. Ramasamkar Tripathi, (Varanasi: B. Tripathi, 1970), p. 59–69.

8. See *Mādhyamikākārikā* of Nāgārjuna, ed. P. L. Vaidya (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1960), chaps. 1 and 15.
9. See *Āgamasāstra* of Gauḍapāda, ed. Vidhusekhara Bhattacharya (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1943), pp. 101–112.
10. For the Buddhist criticism of potentiality (*sāmarthya*), see *Ratnakīrti-nibandhāvalī*, ed. Anantalal Thakur (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute) pp. 62–76.
11. See *Nyāyakusumāñjali* of Udayana, eds. P. Upadhyaya and D. Sastri, (Varanasi: Chowkhamba, 1957), pp. 41–60.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 103–117.
13. See *Nyāyasiddhāntadīpa*, ed. V. P. Dwivedi and Dhundhiraj Shastri, (Benares Cantt.: Lazarus & Co., 1924), pp. 89–92. A critical edition of this text has already been prepared by me and is forthcoming in the L. D. Indological Series, Ahmedabad.
14. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1951), Book I, Part III, Sec. XIV, pp. 166–172.
15. See my *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 71–77.
16. See for a discussion of *ananyathāsiddhatva*, *Tattvacintāmaṇi* of Gaṅgeśa, ed. Kamakhyanatha Tarkavagisa (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1884–1901), Part 2, vol. 3, pp. 154–155.
17. See B. Russell, *Mysticism and Logic* (1917; reprint ed., Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books), pp. 174–201.
18. A. J. Ayer, *Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1951), Chap. 4. R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford The Clarendon Press, 1940), Part 3-C. C. J. Ducasse, *Nature, Mind and Death*, Part II (La Salle, Illinois: The Open Court Publ. Co., 1951).
19. David Hume, *op. cit.*, p. 172.
20. Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, Essay 4, included in *Works*, ed. Sir William Hamilton, (Edinburg: Maclachlan & Stewart, 1846–1863).
21. J. S. Mill, *A System of Logic*, 8th ed., Book III, Chap. V, Sec. 6 (1843; New York: Harper, 1881).
22. In fact, the *ananyathāsiddhatva* criterion cannot, in final analysis, successfully exclude all irrelevant factors from the relevant causal factor. Gaṅgeśa discusses the problem in *Tattvacintāmaṇi*, Part 2, vol. 3, p. 154–155. The important question, namely, why, of two invariably conjoined factors, one is taken to be the causal factor rather than the other, depends partly, according to Gaṅgeśa, on our intuitive notion of simplicity (*lāghava*) and relevance.