

Metaphysical foundations: Causes

The basis of order is causality: things are ordered insofar as they have their place in the chains of cause and effect which link the great and the small, the immaterial and material, the universal and the particular together. Without that order, there could be no truth or beauty in the cosmos, and in the human world reason and sympathy would be impotent: but what is cause? What types of causes are there? And how does cause work?

The Platonic tradition makes a distinction between true causes and “concauses” (or “auxiliary causes”) – true causes act through their own power and maintain a degree of separation from their effects, while concauses are relatively passive and are in varying degrees inseparable from their effects (so that they are sometimes called *proximate* causes). True causes are metaphysical, concauses are physical (using that word in its widest sense, which is connected to the Greek word *phusis*, or nature). A metaphysical cause is not diminished or exhausted by its causative activity; a physical cause always is in some way.

The developed Platonic position on causes identifies three primary causes:

The **final** – that is to say the purpose of something, or that *for the sake of which* something is, or acts;

The **paradigmatic** – the general model or form *in relation to which* something arises;

The **efficient** – the maker or that *by which* something arises.

And there are three main concauses:

The **instrumental** – the means *through which* the thing is formed;

The **formal** – the specific plan or form *according to which* the effect is shaped;

The **material** – the stuff *on which* (or *in which*) something is made.

Thus a coin is made for the **purpose** of allowing trade to take place, the paradigm is the **general pattern** of coinage (which includes the essential properties of a coin – it must be wear resistant, easily handled, give information about its value and its issuing authority, etc), the **efficient maker** is the official mint *by which* all coins are produced; the **instrumental** is the stamp *through which* the mint actually produces the coins; the **formal** is the specific design *according to which* a particular coin is made identifiably different from any other coin of varying denomination or design; the **material** is the metal (or whatever) *on which* the stamp with its specific design impresses itself.

Since we are looking at metaphysical concepts rather than physical laws, we are going to concern ourselves with the upper three causes – the final, the paradigmatic and the efficient. Proclus has a whole series of propositions which explore the way in which these causes shape the manifested universe. Here are a few of them:

Proposition 7: Every productive cause is superior to that which it produces.

Proposition 11: All beings proceed from One First Cause.

To which Proclus adds the following argument:

For either there is no cause of any being,

or the causes of all finite things revolve in a circle,

or the (regression) is to infinity, and one thing is the cause of another, and the positing of prior causes will not cease.

If, however, there is no cause of beings, there will be neither an order of things second and first, of things perfecting and perfected, of things adorning and adorned, of things generating and generated, and of agents and patients, nor will there be any science of beings. For the knowledge of causes is the work of science, and we are then said to know scientifically when we know the causes of things.

But if causes revolve in a circle, the same things will be prior and posterior, more powerful and weaker. For every thing which produces is better than the nature of that which is produced. Nor does it make a difference to link cause to effect, and through many or fewer intermediate steps to produce from cause. For cause will be superior to all the intermediate natures of which it is the cause; and the more numerous the media the greater is the causality of the cause.

And if the addition of causes is to infinity, and there is always again a cause prior to another, there will be no science of any being: for there is not a knowledge of any thing infinite. But causes being unknown, neither will there be a science of the things consequent to the causes.

If, therefore, it is necessary that there should be a cause of beings, and causes are distinct from the things caused, and there is not an ascent to infinity, there is a First Cause of beings, from which as from a root every thing proceeds,—some things indeed being nearer to but others more remote from it. The necessity of the existence of One Principle has been demonstrated, because all multitude is secondary to The One.

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Proposition 18: Everything which by its existence bestows a character on others, itself primarily possesses that character which it communicates to its recipients.

Proposition 25: What is complete proceeds to generate those things which it is capable of producing; imitating in its turn the One Principle of all.

Proposition 26: Every productive cause produces the next and *all subsequent natures* while it abides in itself.

Proposition 28: Every producing cause brings into existence things most like itself before those that are unlike.

Causes and participation

Platonic views of causality are questioned by Plato himself in his *Parmenides*, but contrary to conclusions of superficial modern commentators, the theory of forms and their causative power is not overturned. What his questioning does is show that every Form (or Idea) in the strictly Platonic sense of the word is simultaneously transcendent and immanent. Thus in every series which emerges from a paradigmatic principle, the form is transcendent (“unparticipated” – that is to say not part of its own series of effects) and immanent (“participated” – that is to say buried within its effects). This gives us three different moments of a series: the unparticipated, the participated, and the participant.

A physical analogy is the singer, the song, and the audience: the singer sounds the song, and the audience (of one, or ten thousand – it makes no difference) are its participants. Each of the participants has the song in their ears, so the song is ‘in’ the participants as the participated, while the singer is unparticipated, since he or she abides and is not divided into the listening ears.

Proclus has these points to make about this:

Proposition 23: All that is unparticipated produces out of itself the participated; and all participated natures are linked by an upward dynamic to the unparticipated.

Proposition 24: Everything which participates is inferior to the participated, and the participated is inferior to the unparticipated.

