

Personal Causality in Human Action

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Abstract

The study of causality in the natural sciences has always been posed from observing the effect and looking for the cause in a previous time. The principle of causality is caught in a vicious circle based on two assumptions of Kantian origin: (1) causality is a structuring principle of the human mind. (2) In the cause-effect relation, the cause temporally precedes the effect. This knowledge, which as a prerequisite of the action is its temporal antecedent, is the result of the said action. We move in a vicious circle, since the causal principle precedes the action; but in order to know the cause, which produces an effect, the action must be finished.

But in the social sciences, the field in which the individual acts, one has to take into account that the individual pursues a future end which exercises its effects on the present. The antecedent of the action, the cause, does not precede the action in time, but the cause of the action is the desired reality which is projected into the future and we dedicate our present efforts in order to obtain this reality. Provided that we are aware of the person's openness to the future, the anticipated project and the present action are co-determined in the reality of the experienced life. Thus we can say that we form our personality by causal appropriation.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Causality is based on the intrinsic unity of two specific features of the person, thinking and acting. The Kantian theory of knowledge considers that causality is a logical imperative of the human mind. It is an *a priori* structure, that is, prior to every experience that shapes the act of thinking itself. In other words, causality is a principle of knowledge for the mental understanding of reality. Concerning this starting point of Kantian origin, the principle of causality is defined as a law. In this way, causality is the search for regularities among events, postulated in the following form: given A then B occurs. But this cause-effect relation has to be known to the human agent before she acts. So causality is a prerequisite for the action.

This vicious circle is based on two assumptions of Kantian origin: (1) causality is a structuring principle of the human mind. (2) In the cause-effect relation, the cause temporally precedes the effect. The study of the historical formation of these two assumptions is going to be of great interest because it is going to show us the way to resolving the problem of this vicious circle in which we find ourselves.

2 CAUSALITY IN ARISTOTLE

To understand this scheme it is necessary to study its historical genesis. The starting point is the classical one, where the Aristotelian view dominates the whole question. Aristotle bases causality on it being a principle. For Aristotle, this principle, “consist of something arising from something else.”¹ And the cause is a mode of principle. Therefore, causality is a case of principle: the causes are principles. This vision has determined the later development of causality. Causality has been limited to being a special case of the principle of being able to provide an explanation for something. In this view, there is causality when the principle that originates the transformation can be determined. Causality is reduced to being able to give an explanation about the origin of a transformation or change. In the Aristotelian scheme of things the problem that represents the basis of causality and the determination of

the cause are already identified. This first of these is resolved by defining causality as a principle, which leads us to ask ourselves about the way of acting of each principle to determine each cause.

Therefore, the problem of causality is focused on the study of the principles that act on the natural substances. As soon as we know the principle why one thing proceeds from another, we will be able to determine its cause. Aristotle said that the substance has powers, *dynamis*, which go into action because of the influence of the other substances, which are in the action and it is precisely these, which activate the cause. In this way causality precedes the activity. When we can confirm the cause, when we know what has influenced the substance, there will be activity. Aristotle indicated four types of causation: material, formal, efficient and final. For instance, matter is something that stays intrinsic to the developing being, and enables this being to be engendered from its matter. The form gives it a determination; the efficient cause gives it a principle of change; the final cause, a *télos*, or end. To clarify the distinct Aristotelian meanings of causality let us take the following examples. On example of a material cause would be the bronze with in the statue, or the silver in the jewel. The formal cause would be the formal configuration of both the statue and the jewel. However, the material has been given a form, which raises the question, what is the origin of the transformation?² What or who has transformed the bronze or the silver? From the reply we get to this question, we obtain the third form of causation. By replying that the artist has transformed the bronze or the silver, we are pointing out the efficient cause. Lastly, the final cause would be to ask us the reasons why the artist carried out these works.

Of the four types of causation, the first two, the material and the formal are more than arguable and over periods of history they have disappeared. Finality is considered something inherent in the person and has abandoned the general framework of causality, and is reduced to the efficient cause. The reduction of causality to the efficient cause, starting from the Aristotelian framework, was necessary and it was expressed concretely in the study of movement, since, if causality is the determination of the act or *energeia* which activates a power or *dynamis*, it is then necessary to study the causes of the movement.

3 CAUSALITY IN MODERN TIMES

Causality in the Middle Ages was focused on the study of movement in the universe. People discussed what was called the fall of the elements. They discussed, when a body moves in space whether the falling movement was or was not in conformity with the rotating movement, which the body might have. In the opinion of the Spanish philosopher X. Zubiri, it is Galileo who changes this point of view of causality. Galileo defends a new science in which he is going to tell us how things happen, and he measures some dimensions and some duration of time. He measures a series of things and giving them some numbers, he sees that there are effectively some results which are expressed in other numbers, which are functions of the first ones. The problem of the basis of causality in reality disappears and the problem for Aristotle of the determination of the causes is transformed into a statistical study of regularities. As Zubiri points out: “the problem of causality [its basis and the determination of the cause], which had been reduced to the plane of efficient causality, has passed from the plane of efficient causality to the plane of *lex*.”³

Hume criticizes this interpretation of causality as law. His well-known criticism is the following: one can never have experience that the pull on a rope is what produces the sound of bell. What can be said is that regularly and with perfect normality, whenever there is a pull on the rope, in certain conditions, there is produced the sound of a bell. But the fact that the first action is the cause of the second is something that completely escapes the senses. What we call laws are purely and simply habits of showing the succession or the co-existence of certain phenomena which are presented to the perception of the senses. Hume concludes that as there is no basic sensation of causality, then causality is a habit or custom.

It is necessary to distinguish two aspects in Hume’s criticism: (1) Hume again poses the study of causality in its two aspects. He is right when he states that we cannot be sure of knowing the cause of an event. Many times what was considered to be the cause was one that later investigation has refuted. Hume shows that the basis of causality has in reality been reduced to the determination of the cause and, as he points out, knowing the cause is always problematic. (2) But one problem is to determine the cause, which is very problematic, and another problem is to consider that causality is based on habits. Can causality be considered a habit, given the difficulty of knowing the cause with certainty? Yes, says Hume.

These two aspects of Hume’s criticism are the starting point of the Kantian treatment of causality. The analysis of Kant’s work on this problem will

offer us the solution to the vicious circle. Kant criticizes the reduction of causality to mere habit, although he recognizes that Hume had awakened him from his dogmatic dream. That is to say, *he accepts Hume's criticism with respect to the problem of the determination of the cause and he rejects the basis of causality in habits.* In order to understand the argument, which he uses against Hume, the following is a key text, chosen by Zubiri from Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*: "Let us take the proposition, 'everything that happens has its cause. In the concept of something happening, I certainly think of something that exists, prior to which there was a certain time and naturally another time after that and another after that, etc.' From this concept I can deduce as many analytical judgments as I wish. In other words, I can have the concept of a thing that begins, see that the beginning is included within a previous time and a consecutive time, and make all kinds of direct physical and metaphysical analysis of that thing. But the concept of cause is this: the concept that something exists that is different from that which is happening, this can never be obtained from analysis of the concept of what is happening."⁴

Kant tells us, in this paragraph, that any analysis can be made about what happens. But we will never find in this appeal to another thing, distinct from what happens, in which there would be exactly the cause of the event of the first thing. This cannot be obtained with analytical judgements. Hume demonstrated that it was impossible to determine the cause analytically. One cannot obtain more than synthetic judgements.

So the appeal to a second thing is a synthesis with respect to the analysis of the first one. Therefore, the principle of causality is not a principal of reality, but rather it is mere principle of knowledge. In other words, causality is a principle of the apprehension of reality. Kant establishes causality as a principle of human knowledge. For Kant, the value of causality is not based on an analysis of concepts, nor in a perception of realities, but rather it is a condition of intuition inherent in the human intellect. Starting with Kant, the role of the individual in the act of obtaining knowledge is fundamental. The person acquires an active character in cognition. Up to this point, we have seen the formation of the first assumption and still there has been no reference to the vicious circle between causality and action. It is necessary, in order for this to emerge, to analyse the second assumption: *in the cause-effect relation, the cause precedes the effect in time.*

4 THE DETERMINATION OF THE CAUSE IN THE ACTION

The second assumption relates the cause-effect causal structure to the temporal structure establishing that the cause temporally precedes the effect. But, if in order to act the human agent must know the effect of the action, causality is prior to the axiom of action. However, on the other hand, to recognize a certain causal relation, she must be able to perceive the results of her action, and this produces a vicious circle. To resolve this vicious circle it is necessary to study more deeply the Kantian treatment of causality because modernity adopts it in its entirety. Kant's work gives pre-eminence to the active role of the person in knowledge. He makes causality a principle of knowledge, but it is still necessary to explain the method for determining the causes. In this second problem of causality, Kant takes as an example the Physics of Newton. In this mechanistic model everything that is in time has an antecedent that determines it rigorously. Therefore, in this model the cause-effect relation is considered from the point of view of the effect and one seeks the temporal antecedent that originates it. In this way, Kant unites causality and temporal determination.

We are not going to get involved here in the importance that causal determinism has for Physics. We are going to focus on the study of human action, bearing in mind, that it is kingdom of final causality or teleological causality and we are going to ask whether in human action the causes have to be antecedent in time. Modernity takes this Kantian premise of causality as his starting point, according to which, the temporal form of causality is the condition why the principle of causality is applied to real things. The knowledge of what has happened previously is the step prior to knowledge of the cause. In this temporal form of causality, the principle of causality is prior to the action. This situation causes the vicious circle: the causal principle precedes the action; but in order to know the cause, which produces an effect, the action must be finished.

The vicious circle comes from following the Kantian model exactly and placing the antecedents of the action in a time prior to the finished action, which as we shall see is false. Let us consider this phrase: *the person acts, motivated by a future that exercises its effects on the present*. The antecedent of the action, the cause, does not precede the action in time, but the cause of the action is the desired reality, which is projected into the future and we dedicate our present efforts in order to obtain this reality. In other words, in human action, the cause does not precede the action but it is based on the person's activity of making projections into the future.

We need to make a short digression concerning this paragraph because

of the pertinent criticism that is made for this point. It is pointed out quite correctly that in the action, there is the anticipation of the subsequent effect, which constitutes the cause of the action. Thus, *the project temporarily precedes the performance of the action*. This criticism is correct provided that one takes the following into account. Rather than preceding in time, the project is based on the category of anticipation, which is given in the present consciousness of the action, and of the person herself in the course of the action itself. Therefore, the anticipated action and the real action cannot be reduced to a mere extrapolation of past experiences. Provided that we are aware of the person openness to the future, the anticipated project and the present action are co-determined in the reality of the experienced life. That is to say, in the course of the action the project is always in a state of constant revision. Thus the future project exercises its effects on the present time of the action, and at the same time, the present performance of the action feeds back to the project. *If we organize this process chronologically, from this point of view, we can state that the action precedes the project*. That is, even accepting the premises of the criticism, we have reached the opposite premise. Therefore, I think it is very difficult to consider the project as something given prior to the action. If we simply state that the project precedes the action chronologically, we can separate it analytically from its originating structure and consider it *a priori* to the action. If this was so, *it would be necessary to consider the sense of the action once it had been realized and we would fall into the vicious circle*, which we have already explained. In short, although I accept that one can consider that the project precedes the action in time, one must take into account, that in reality, between the project and the action there is a constant feedback. To avoid this problem of the chronological antecedents of some elements on others, I consider that my position is theoretically solid. And I stand by the statement that in human action the cause does not precede the action, but it is based on the person's activity of making projections into the future. For instance, In the case of severe drug addiction the relationship is pathological. In it there is no desirable future to make the individual change her present. Why seek to give up drugs? There is no attempt at isolated acts to delay the next dose and that might allow the pernicious habit to be given up. There is no future, and accordingly the present is strictly a repetition of the past. This is a clear example of failure in the attempt to construct a "basic intentional act" in answering the question "why give up drugs?"⁵

However, it is necessary to develop a concept of causality that fits in with this dynamic structure of the action. And in my opinion, for this task, the concept of personal causality, which we are going to introduce shortly,

may be most suitable for resolving this problem. Zubiri says: “As I see the matter, it is essential that we introduce a type of what we might call “personal causality”. The classical idea of causality (the four causes) is essentially moulded upon natural things; it is a natural causality. But nature is just one mode of reality; there are also personal realities. And a metaphysical conceptualization of personal causality is necessary. The causality between persons *qua* persons cannot be fitted into the four classical causes. Nonetheless, it is strict causality.”⁶

The study of causality in the natural sciences has always been posed from observing the effect and looking for the cause in a previous time. But in the social sciences, the field in which the person acts, one has to take into account that the person pursues a future end, which exercises its effects on the present. With the concept of personal causality developed by Zubiri, the vicious circle between causality and action disappears. *The cause is constituted in the dynamic structure of the action.*

The two problems posed by causality - its philosophical basis and the determination of the cause - are resolved. The first supposition is completely valid as a philosophical basis of causality. However, the real problem that the person faces when acting is to know what to do to change her situation. As Aristotle says: “the end aimed at is not knowledge but action”.⁷ It is this second problem, that is, the determination of the causes of the action which is the responsibility of the theory of human action. If we take into account that the person always acts with an end in mind, which she projects into the future, then, this end is the cause that makes the human agent transform his situation. In short, with regard to the basis of causality, it is right that causality is a necessary gnoseological principle so that the person can intuit reality. If the means and the ends were not in causal relation, they would be unintelligible.

But, regarding the determination of the cause, the perception of the ends that motivate the person to act is the causal dynamism that in the dynamic structure of the action organizes the action in projects. We are going to maintain Zubiri’s terminology and denote this causal dynamism as *personal causality* and to differentiate it from final causality. The former refers to personal dynamism *par excellence*: human action.⁸ We also find this expression in the work of Karol Wojtyła. In his book *Acting Person* he states: “it is man’s actions, his conscious acting, that make of him what and who he actually is. This form of the human becoming thus presupposes the efficacy or causation proper to man.”⁹ And he follows: “The personal causation is contained in having the experience of efficacy of the concrete ego - but only when man is acting.”¹⁰

The scheme of the laws of natural science, developed by Galileo, cannot be related to the problem of personal causality. In this law everything is reversible. Any of its terms can be taken as the subject of the law. I can pose the law as Y as the function of X or inversely, X as the function of Y. In personal causality this is not possible. Once a cause is given the effects are irreversible. One can correct the course of the action, but what is a fact is a fact. Causality is applied independently of any idea of scientific law. Reality is much more than a system of regularities. The problem of the reality of the action is to see who provides the motives. Human action is not reducible to the study of some past regularity. As Zubiri indicates, human action is self-positioning: “and consequently, the antecedents do not fit the scheme ‘consequent-antecedent.’”¹¹ The action encompasses the causality, and not the other way round. In the natural sciences, causality is studied from its effect. A phenomenon attracts peoples’ attention and they try to determine its causes. If it is not possible to do this with absolute certainty, at least it can be done in statistical terms. This is the usual scientific utilization of the principle of causality, which works from the effects. But this principle only explains how things occur. More than causes they are conditions. This principle does not propose the idea that the person does things with reality. He only studies what there is at a certain moment. This principle of the law: “it does not pose the problem as to what ‘beginning’ means and what ‘ceasing to be’ signifies in reality.”¹² This principle is not applicable outside the field of repeatable and controllable experiments. It must adapt itself to the laws of probability. But *probability cannot say anything about what does not exist, because what does not exist must be created.*

5 CONCLUSION

It is necessary to develop a concept of causality that fits in with this dynamic structure of the action. And in my opinion, for this task, the concept of personal causality introduced in this article and explained by K. Wojtyła applies: “There is between person and action a sensibly experimental, causal relation, which brings the person, that is to say, every concrete human ego, to recognize his action to be the result of his efficiency... The students of the problems of causality, on the one hand, and psychologists, on the other, often note that human acting is in fact the only complete experience of what has been called by Aristotle ‘efficient causation’.”¹³

Each individual has possibilities of action. Of these possibilities she appropriates one and rejects the rest. This appropriation is determined by the kind of person that I am. Or in other words, our acts cause our habits and activities and our activities cause our personality. Thus we can say that we form our personality by causal appropriation.¹⁴

NOTES

1. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V, I, 1013a 17-18.
2. In the efficient Aristotelian causality, it is necessary to distinguish between the principles of intrinsic and extrinsic transformation. In this example of the jewel the efficient principle is extrinsic to the bronze, since it is the artist who shapes it. On the other hand, the intrinsic efficient causality depends on the substance.
3. X. Zubiri, *Dynamic Structure of Reality*, trans. N.R. Orringer, University of Illinois Press, Illinois, 2003, p. 50.
4. I. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B13, 9-11.
5. See the definition of a “basic intentional act” in G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1957.
6. X. Zubiri, *Intelligence and Reason*, trans. T.B. Fowler, Xavier Zubiri Foundation of North America, Washington, 1997, p. 339.
7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095a6.
8. Maurice Blondel also defends a concept of causality that is applied to human action and that is not reducible to the four classical causes. He asks the question: “how can the different parts of an organic system cooperate in such a way that they become the means and the end, because an efficient cause finds in the other cause —the final cause, a spontaneous complicity with its own, which depends on the same ruling idea?” M. Blondel, *L’Action*, 3th edn, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1973, p. 223. In the original: “Comment diverses parties d’un même système organique peuvent-elles opérer de manière à devenir mutuellement moyen et fin, sinon parce que l’une, cause efficiente, trouve dans l’autre, cause finale, une spontanéité complice de la sienne sous la dépendance d’une même idée directrice?”
He offers us the following solution to this question: “the causal link is at the same time an objective disposition and an empirical association. Its originality consists in being at the same time analytical *a priori* and synthetic *a posteriori*, because each one of the subjects which contributes to the effect produced is a principal agent” (M. Blondel, *Ibid.*, 223). In the original: “ainsi le lien causal résulte à la fois d’une disposition subjective et d’une association empirique. Son originalité, c’est d’être à la fois analytique *a priori* est synthétique *a posteriori*, car dans l’effet produit, chacun des sujets qui y contribuent est un agent principal”.
9. K. Wojtyła, *Acting Person*, D. Reidel, Dordrecht. 1979, p. 118.

10. Ibid., p. 98.
 11. Zubiri, *Dynamic Structure of Reality*, cit., p. 61.
 12. Ibid., p. 63.
 13. K. Wojtyła, *Acting Person*, cit., p.67.
 14. On the causal appropriation of possibilities see J. Aranzadi, *The Possibilities of the Acting Person within an Institutional Framework: Goods, Norms and Virtues*, «Journal of Business Ethics» 2011 (99), pp. 87-100.
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