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CAUSE IN THE WRITINGS

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In the history of philosophy *cause* has had a number of usages, and the idea of causality has met with acceptance and rejection—both for a variety of reasons. The four causes of Aristotle were succeeded, in Scholasticism, by a hierarchy of causes under Divine mind as the first or supreme cause. Thomism defined cause for Catholic philosophy. Occasionalism and rationalism added treatments to the subject; and Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Mill, in turn, made distinctive contributions in the usages established by their distinguishing of categories or emphasizing of certain qualities.

As a reasonable explanation causality is rejected today by many workers in physics and other disciplines, and with other relics of the pre-scientific age is regarded as an antiquated concept. Thus the Quantum Theory has been hailed by some physicists as having led to the outmoding of the principle of causality as an axiom in scientific research, and Heisenberg has said that the invalidity of causality is definitely established by quantum mechanics. Determinism and causality, it is held also, go together, and in the face of indeterminacy the principle of causality cannot be sustained. Furthermore, it has been contended that as causality involves time, the concept has been outmoded since physics showed us the existence of a "new time."

It would be interesting and instructive to place Swedenborg and the Writings historically in the literature and to discuss Swedenborg's usage of the term, cause, in the philosophical works in a comparative study. Our purpose, however, is twofold: to present the main teachings of the Writings concerning cause, and this with the belief that they define and distinguish their usage clearly; and

to consider from those teachings the extent to which the human mind may have knowledge of causes and whether it is possible for a man living in this world to think from causes.

Before we proceed to the doctrine, however, it may not be amiss—despite what has been said about the clarity of the teaching—to preface one remark. In the Writings, and therefore in New Church philosophy, cause has a meaning entirely different from that which is attached to it in common philosophical and scientific usage. The idea of causality revealed in the Writings does not have reference to continuous degrees of one substance, but to substance in its several discrete degrees; and cause and effect describes a relation, not between substances or entities on the same plane, but between substances or entities on discretely different planes—a relation which involves discrete degrees and therefore influx and correspondence. Thus the idea is far more interior than that of merely instrumental cause, or of the limited concept expressed in terms of one thing following another successively in time. This, we believe, is made clear in the doctrine; and as the knowledge of discrete degrees is like a key to open the causes of things,¹ it is not to be wondered at that the Writings, which disclose the existence of those degrees, reveal an entirely new concept of cause.

THE DOCTRINE OF CAUSE

The doctrine is compact but comprehensive, and its implications are manifold and far reaching. All things that exist, the teaching is, are as cause and effect, and no effect can exist without an efficient cause. That cause is the internal of the effect, and the effect itself is the external of the efficient cause.² Unless what is lower exists from interior things, as an effect from its efficient cause, it does not exist at all.³ These are universals, and they lead to the further teaching that whatever exists in the natural world derives its origin and cause from things which exist in the spiritual world.⁴ The natural world, indeed, is from the spiritual world as an effect from its cause, to the end that the spiritual may inflow into the natural world and there act out causes.⁵ Natural things, therefore,

¹ DLW 184.

² AC 9473: 2.

³ AC 3563.

⁴ AC 8211: 2.

⁵ AC 6048e.

are nothing but effects. Their causes are in the spiritual world, and the causes of these causes, which are ends, are in the interior heaven; that is, their causes are from truth, which is spiritual, and the beginnings of causes are from good, which is celestial.⁶ Because natural things thus exist from spiritual ones as effects from causes there is a correspondence of all things in the world with those in heaven, and whatever in universal nature does not have correspondence with the spiritual world does not exist. It has no cause from which it may exist, and thus from which it may subsist.⁷

All causes, then, are in the spiritual world, and all things which appear in the natural world are effects; and there does not exist a natural thing which does not derive its cause from the spiritual world.⁸ There are indeed causes in the natural world, for in nature as in the spiritual world all things seek something ulterior to themselves in which to act out the cause in the effect; but as every cause exists from one prior to itself, every cause in the natural world is still from a prior cause in the spiritual world.⁹ While New Church philosophy, then, recognizes that there are causes in nature, it treats them as secondary and looks to the spiritual world for primary or at least prior causes.

These teachings indicate clearly, we believe, the meaning of cause as the term is used in the Writings. The teaching concerning the relation of effects to their causes appears to be equally specific and lucid. An effect is not of the effect itself but is of its efficient cause. In other words, the cause constitutes the effect, for in any effect there is nothing that acts but the cause, and effects are representations of the uses which are their efficient causes.¹⁰ The effect is, indeed, the continuation of the cause. It cannot subsist unless the cause is constantly in it. When the cause ceases, so does the effect; wherefore without a continuous influx of the cause the effect perishes.¹¹ Thus the thing caused, the effect, is of the cause, for all the force in the effect is from the cause.¹² Therefore it is said that the cause is the all of the effect; and that, regarded in itself, the effect is nothing but the cause so clothed outwardly

⁶ AC 5711. Cf. AC 2992.

⁷ AC 8812e. Cf. AC 5711.

⁸ DLW 119, 134e.

⁹ AC 3908. Cf. AC 6077.

¹⁰ AC 1568, 5326: 2, 1807: 3.

¹¹ AC 5711, 5116: 3.

¹² AC 6262e.

that it may serve in a lower sphere to enable the cause to act itself out there.¹³

There are, it is true, more things in the effect than there are in the cause. However, these are merely such as make it possible for the cause to act out the effect in ultimates, and thus to produce itself actually in the degree wherein the effect exists.¹⁴

We note as of fundamental importance to the Writings' concept of causality that cause and effect are related only by discrete degrees. Causes do not produce effects by continuity but by discreteness. The cause is on one plane and the effect on another that is discretely lower or more external, and the difference between them is as that between what is prior and posterior, or the thing forming and the thing formed.¹⁵ Now discrete degrees are the degrees of the formation or composition of one thing from another; so cause and effect cannot be thought of as one thing followed by another on the same plane, or as successive states of the same substance or entity, but as the spiritual thing forming and the natural thing formed.

Furthermore we note that the Writings recognize discrete degrees of cause. The principal cause is in all things of the instrumental cause, they teach, and the two act as one when there is correspondence between them. Exterior things are all formed to serve interior ones as instrumental causes serve their principal causes, and the former without the latter are dead causes.¹⁶

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THE DOCTRINE

In the usage of the Writings, then, cause, when the term is not qualified, is spiritual and therefore finite, and we would identify it with conatus. It is of a discretely different degree than effect; it operates by influx; and its operation requires correspondence. This has several implications, only a few of which can be mentioned briefly here.

The idea of cause and effect as a relation between substances on discretely different planes involves a new idea of time in regard to that relation. While effects occur in time, it cannot be said, in the light of the teachings noted, that they follow causes in a time sequence; for while the spiritual operates within the extense of

¹³ AC 5651, 5711.

¹⁴ AC 5326: 2.

¹⁵ HH 38; DLW 185: 3.

¹⁶ AC 6523e, 8717; TCR 442.

time, its own characteristic is state. It does not enter into time until it produces itself in the effect, and the effect does not exist until that production has taken place. Here it may be necessary to distinguish between occasion of and reason for, on the one hand, and cause on the other. There is no time interval between thought and speech as cause and effect, but an influx of thought, which is spiritual, that simultaneously composes or forms itself into speech; and although there are reasons for one man to be slower of speech than another, and occasions on which speech may be halting, this is not because of an accelerated or decelerated rate of influx in time! We shall not be misunderstood when we say here that the spiritual is not in time. Therefore the ratio between the spiritual and the natural is not one of time but of correspondence, and that can be expressed only, not as a time sequence, but as simultaneity.

Reflection on influx, correspondence and the characteristics of discrete degrees may shed further light on the problem that is certainly involved here. The ultimate in which the cause seeks to work itself out as the effect may not yet be in correspondence with it, and non-correspondence impedes influx. The change that must be effected in the ultimate to make it correspondent may take place within a time sequence although it is not actually effected in time—as in the regeneration of the human mind; but when correspondence has been brought about, or to the extent that it has, the influx is simultaneous. The interval involved would be wrongly attributed if it were regarded as a time-lag between cause and effect, and not as a period of preparation to receive influx. Nor should we lose sight of the fact that the ultimate degree in a series of end, cause and effect has qualities of limitation that are peculiar to itself, for unless these are taken into account the appearance may arise that there is a time interval between cause and effect.

Further reflection on these things may suggest the lines along which another problem may be approached. The problem is whether it can be said that the effect always follows the cause; not in a time sequence, but in the sense of being produced by it. Cause produces effects by discreteness, as we have seen, and thus acts by correspondence, and in action by correspondence the law of homogeneity applies. The degrees in a series of end, cause and effect are of necessity homogeneous, and what is heterogene-

ous cannot combine with what is homogeneous to form discrete degrees.¹⁷ In those things which are in the order impressed upon them from creation the question does not arise; but in the human mind which was created to act with the Divine, as an instrumental with its principal cause, heterogeneity can and does arise, and the question then is whether the effect follows the cause—whether it can follow. For the present we would answer only that wherever the cause is enabled to be present, the effect always follows; that is, wherever it is enabled to be present as cause—to apply itself and produce itself on a discretely lower plane. The human mind may reject a particular influx, but it cannot reject all influx; and whatever influx it chooses will, as cause, produce a homogeneous effect. This may seem like oversimplification, but we believe that it isolates the main point. From the standpoint of the Divine the effect may be other than what is willed; but whatever cause becomes operative will surely produce its own effect. Here, however, we approach another doctrine, that of the Divine Providence.

Finally, it was noted that the Writings recognize discrete degrees of cause. Thus one passage speaks of the first or principal cause, the mediate or efficient cause, and the ultimate cause or effect—the end for the sake of which the others are.¹⁸ It is suggested that by the principal cause is here meant the Divine love acting by means of the Divine wisdom; that the efficient cause refers to those forces in the spiritual world which are from the Lord; and that the ultimate cause is the natural world, and also the mind of man on earth.¹⁹ It is tempting to try to align Aristotle's four causes with the degrees of cause spoken of in the Writings. In one subject-field only, and abstracted from the idea of time, we would tentatively designate the end of the Divine Providence in creation—a heaven from the human race—as the *formal cause*; the natural degree of the mind which is to be regenerated as the *material cause*; the process of regeneration, including all the means operative therein, as the *efficient cause*; and the angelic heaven itself as the *final cause*. These categories could, of course, be applied to the entire doctrine of uses, but that is another subject.

¹⁷ DLW 291, 192–195.

¹⁹ Cf. TCR 27e.

¹⁸ TCR 685.

CAUSE AND THE HUMAN MIND

Two related questions remain to be considered briefly: to what extent may the human mind have knowledge of causes; and, is it possible for men on earth to think from causes? We begin by noting the following teachings. Effects may indeed be observed, but unless their causes are seen at the same time, the effects can appear only as if in the night; for effects teach nothing but effects, and when they alone are examined they do not bring forth any cause. On the other hand, causes bring effects to light, and to know effects from causes is to be wise; but to seek out causes from effects is not to be wise, because then fallacies present themselves which the investigator mistakes for causes, and wisdom is turned into foolishness. Causes are prior, effects are posterior; and the former cannot be seen from the latter, but the latter can be seen from the former.²⁰

If man can have no knowledge of causes, and cannot think from them, these teachings are surely without meaning. Man is in effects, and it is stated that he does not *see* causes; being able to perceive them merely through some things of state.²¹ What is actually said here should be carefully noted, however, and the force of the qualifying statement should not be overlooked. For elsewhere we are taught that the natural sees from the effect, the rational from the cause; and that the intellectual with man consists, among other things, in the view of causes from effects, and of consequences in connection with causes.²² Yet it is true that the mind can have no knowledge of causes apart from effects. The causes of things, we are told, can indeed be seen rationally, but not clearly except by means of effects, for the causes are in the effects, and there make themselves manifest; nor does man confirm himself concerning causes before they are thus seen.²³ However, if causes are first known to some extent, effects place causes themselves in the light.²⁴

It is quite true that our only direct contact with substances in discrete degrees is with those which are ultimate or outmost. We have immediate knowledge, therefore, only of them. Our sense

²⁰ DLW 107e, 119.

²¹ AC 4073e.

²² AC 3533e, 6125.

²³ DLW 375, 256e.

²⁴ DLW 256e.

impressions are of effects because they are on the plane of these degrees, and we cannot sense directly those interior planes on which causes exist. However, we are taught that the interior degrees do exist; and we are taught also that we can think about them and are given in the Writings the means of so doing. The knowledge of discrete degrees, we are told, is as a key to open the causes of things, and without this knowledge scarcely anything of cause can be known. Those who are ignorant of discrete degrees, the teaching continues, cannot see causes from any judgment. They see only effects, and judge of causes from them; which for the most part is done from inductions continuous with effects, when yet causes do not produce effects by continuity but by discreteness.²⁵

The doctrine of discrete degrees has been revealed in fullness, as have the related doctrines of influx and correspondence, to make possible, among other things, the development of New Church philosophy: philosophy one of the essentials of which is thought from cause. The natural mind does think from effects, and the recognition of this is basic to that philosophy. Basic also, however, is the truth that the rational mind can learn to think about cause—can learn to think from the principle of cause, and therefrom, and in the light of doctrine, to see causes in and from effects. Cause is spiritual, and it is true that as long as man lives on earth he thinks naturally even when rationally about spiritual things, since the elevation of the understanding is by continuous degrees. But it is also true that, subject to this qualification, he can think about causes and from them. Without the application and development of this ability there cannot be a rational philosophy, or, for that matter, a rational theology.

It is of the quality of the Writings, and of the genius of the New Church, that there shall be such a philosophy—one upon which the wisdom of the angels may rest. Not the least of its characteristics will be the kind of thought which takes into consideration the ability of the truly rational mind to think about cause, to see causes in effects, and to think from cause—to think from the knowledge of a spiritual cause, and from an understanding of its nature—in the investigation of effects.

²⁵ DLW 184, 185: 3.