

II. BECOMING AS CREATIVITY

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What makes a thing bring about another thing different from itself? What sense is there in saying that what has become comes from what was before? We are so immersed in change that our sense of wonder is blunted and we come to take the becoming of one thing out of another as the most natural of things. Yet reflection should make it plain that for one thing to produce or to become another thing different from itself is truly mystifying. To describe in minutest detail the stages through which the sprout passes in coming out of the seed only gives us the delusion of understanding but the mystery remains unfathomable; and such is all so-called scientific explanation. Indeed we cannot find a single instance of one particular thing bringing about another: we always have a combination of circumstances or elements in the first place, but that does not make things any better. So in the case of the sprout to bring in the role of the soil and water and sunrays does not make the mystery less mysterious.

The term ‘cause’ is an empty word, a veil to hide our ignorance. Newton named the mysterious thing behind one body attracting or being attracted by another gravitation but he confessed he had no idea what that might be. In all the so-called explanations provided by science for natural happenings we have a description of contributing elements or an account or successive stages. Such knowledge of what goes on in the coming about of any given state of affairs is practically useful. That is the stuff of all of our empirical science. It enables us to anticipate, to control, to manipulate, natural processes. But we deceive ourselves when we think it explains anything. All we know, as Hume insisted, is that one thing follows another.

Bertrand Russell found that we can do without the notion of cause; all we need are the laws of nature (“On the Notion of Cause, with Applications to the Free-Will Problem”). But the laws of nature are patterns we formulate, descriptive of natural processes, and luckily find them fitting natural processes to a satisfactory degree of accuracy. To speak of ‘Laws of Nature’ as explaining — or worse still, as causing

or governing — the goings on in nature is utter folly, though readily condoned by eminently brilliant scientists and philosophers. (They are not stupid; they simply do not have the philosophical urge to understand; instead they have the practical drive to control and manipulate the natural process.) Wittgenstein rightly said: “The whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.371, tr. Pears and McGuinness).

In the *Phaedo* Socrates presents the fundamental insight that it is by the ideas created by the mind that a thing has meaning for us, becomes what it is for us: it is by the idea of Beauty that we find anything beautiful (95e-102a). [See Chapter Five, “The Meaning of the *Phaedo*” in, *Plato: An Interpretation*, download: <https://archive.org/details/PlatoAnInterpretation>]. Plato (in what is referred to as the final argument for immortality) derives from this a ‘method of explanation’: a thing becomes hot when it is imbued with the form of heat. I see this as one of Plato’s whimsical excursions into theorizing and in any case this is not how a thing comes to be but how it becomes intelligible to us in itself.

Aristotle busied himself with the problem of causation and came up with not one but four ‘causes’ for a thing, none of which is a cause in any satisfactory sense. The formal cause is just the shadow of the Socratic-Platonic form. The material cause is what we start with, what the thing was before it became what it has become. The final cause, in the case of man-made things, is the end or purpose of the activity that brings the thing about. The efficient cause, again in the case of man-made things, is the maker, and it is the model after which the God of monotheistic theology is fashioned. Aristotle’s doctrine of four causes is a good exercise in analysis but it explains nothing.

The dialectical thesis-antithesis-synthesis commonly attributed to Hegel takes the scientific idea of a natural law to its apex: it is a formal abstract pattern, or rather a paradigm, of natural laws, that luckily fits many happenings. It may be a good rule for guiding our analyses of happenings, but it explains nothing and definitely, in itself, brings about nothing.

Thus all the wrestlings of thinkers with the problem of how things come about have, or should have, one result: to awaken our wonder and heighten our

awareness that becoming — the playful metamorphosis of all things, going all around us all the time — is an ultimate riddle. And the key to the riddle is within us. The only intelligible becoming of which we have immediate cognizance is the spontaneous becoming of our thoughts and deeds. I am writing these lines; nothing causes my thoughts or the words in which I clothe my thoughts; my thoughts and my words creatively outflow from my inner being. When the mind communes with its inner reality, Plato says, it gives birth to reason and reality (*Republic* 490a-b). My simplest acts burst out of my total being as a plant sprouts out of the seed; my deepest feelings gush out from my innermost reality. All the analyses of physiologists and neurologists are external descriptions that explain nothing. Shelley cannot find any explanation for the singing of the Skylark but that the happy bird pours its “full heart / In profuse strains of unpremeditated art”. And why should not the skylark be happy? What do we know of the innermost state of things? Except that we dress our ignorance in the garb of science.

The only way I can find any becoming intelligible is to see all being and all becoming as creative. All things, all deeds, all states of being have antecedents; the antecedent does not cause the consequent but creatively flowers in the consequent. Modern philosophers have needlessly made a problem of free will. They readily belie their immediate awareness of their free action because it is thought to be incompatible with the fiction of causal determinism. Besides overlooking the consideration that ‘laws of nature’ do not cause or explain natural processes, they pay no regard to the consideration that all ‘laws of nature’ are abstract approximations. How do we know that the most common phenomenal occurrence, good-naturedly complying with our predictions and expectations, does not actually come with a difference, just as a singer, singing to the score, cannot but sing differently every time if only because the singer’s larynx and whole body never ceases changing from moment to moment? How can the most accurate calculation of the Earth’s revolution around the sun not be an approximation when the sun, the earth, and all the stuff in between, never cease to change? Surely the sun this hour is not what it was earlier this morning and the Earth today has suffered change since yesterday; and this is not philosophy but the strictest of science. Nature never does the same thing twice without some delicate modulation, even if that escapes our gross senses and our gross instruments. Of all modern scientists, Einstein was

the one who saw this clearly and expressed it lucidly: “As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain, as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality”, he said.

The pseudo-problem of ‘free will’ has been needlessly complicated by confusing free will with freedom of choice. Choice and deliberation are, strictly, not instances of freedom but of constraint. It is in so far as we are imperfect and subject to external influences that we have to deliberate and to make choices which are always conditioned by antecedents. We are truly free in spontaneous moral and creative activity. But not only on that exalted level do we act freely. The humblest of our daily motions are free: I take a sip of coffee because I will it; I get up and walk to the window because I will it. Socrates explains that he remains in prison to face death not because his bones and joints and sinews necessitate it but because he will be true to his convictions (*Phaedo* 98c-e). The word ‘will’ itself is misleading when we think of will as a faculty. The materialist Hobbes knew better than the rationalists and idealists: there is no Will; there is only willing (*Leviathan*, Part I., chap.VI); the act is fully spontaneous. But the materialists are wrong when they think the willing is produced by what can be subjected to objective observation whatever that might be. The willing wells up from nowhere, or rather from the non-existent personality (the ‘transcendent’ reality of the person). (For the seemingly occult notion of ‘non-existent reality’ see under “Eternity and Freedom” below.) When we act freely it is our whole being that outflows freely in the act. A little baby’s happy giggle is the free outflow of the baby’s wellbeing. Again when scientists speak of glands and chemical processes and neural what not, I say: Thank you, that is very interesting; but if you think that causes or explains the happy giggle you are misusing the term ‘explain’.

In the *Timaeus* Plato mythically says that the *demiourgos* made the world because, being good, he wanted to propagate his goodness. In the *Republic* the Form of the Good is the source of all life, all being, all understanding. That is the only intelligible view of the source of the world. Ultimate Reality being intelligent and good outflows creatively — or as Plotinus would put it, emanates — in the universe of being and becoming and it is the ultimate creativity of Reality that creatively sustains and creatively renews everything and is the only intelligible ground for all being and all becoming.

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