

Causation

by F. H. Bradley (1846–1924)

THE object of this chapter is merely to point out, first, the main discrepancy in causation, and, in the second place, to exhibit an obstacle coming from time's continuity. Some other aspects of the general question will be considered in later chapters.

We may regard cause as an attempt to account rationally for change. A becomes B, and this alteration is felt to be not compatible with A. Mere A would still be mere A, and, if it turns to something different, then something else is concerned. There must, in other words, be a reason for the change. But the endeavour to find a satisfactory reason is fruitless.

We have seen that A is not B, nor, again, a relation to B. "Followed by B," "changing into AB," are not the same as A; and we were able to discover no way of combining these with A which could be more than mere appearance. In causation we must now consider a fresh effort at combination, and its essence is very simple. If "A becomes B" is a self-contradiction, then add something to A which will divide the burden. In "A + C becomes B" we may perhaps find relief. But this relief, considered theoretically, is a mass of contradictions.

It would be a thankless task to work these out into detail, for the root of the matter may be stated at once. If the sequence of the effect is different from the cause, how is the ascription of this difference to be rationally defended? If, on the other hand, it is not different, then causation does not exist, and its assertion is a farce. There is no escape from this fundamental dilemma.

We have in the cause merely a fresh instance of compromise without principle, another case of pure makeshift. And it soon exhibits its nature. The cause was not mere A; that would be found too intolerable. The cause was A + C; but this combination seems meaningless. It is offered in the face of our result as to the nature of relations (Chapter iii.); and by that result it has already been undermined and ruined. But let us see how it proposes to go

about its business. In “A + C followed by B” the addition of C makes a difference to A, or it makes no difference. Let us suppose, first, that it does make a difference to A. But, if so, then A has already been altered; and hence the problem of causation breaks out within the very cause. A and C become A + C, and the old puzzle begins about the way in which A and C become other than they are. We are concerned here with A, but, of course, with C there is the same difficulty. We are, therefore, driven to correct ourselves, and to say that, not A and C merely, but A and C + D become A + C, and so B. But here we perceive at once that we have fallen into endless regress within the cause. If the cause is to be the cause, there is some reason for its being thus, and so on indefinitely.

Or let us accept the other alternative. Let us assert boldly that in A + C, which is the cause of B, their relation makes no difference either to A or to C, and yet accounts for the effect. Although the conjunction makes no difference, it justifies apparently our attribution to the cause of the difference expressed by the effect. But (to deal first with the cause) such a conjunction of elements has been shown (Chapter iii.) to be quite unintelligible. And to the defence that it is only our own way of going on, the answer is twofold. If it is only our way, then, either it does not concern the thing at all, or else is admitted to be a mere practical makeshift. If, on the other hand, it is a way of ours with the thing which we are prepared to justify, let the justification be produced. But it cannot be produced in any form but in the proof that our thinking is consistent. On the other hand, the only reason for our hesitation above to attribute our view to reality seemed to lie in the fact that our view was not consistent. But, if so, it surely should not be our view. And, to pass now to the effect, the same reasoning there holds good. The sequence of a difference still remains entirely irrational. And, if we attempt here to take this difference upon ourselves, and to urge that it does not attach to the thing, but only to our view, the same result follows. For what is this but a manner of admitting politely that in reality there is no difference and is no causation, and that, in short, we are all agreed in finding causation to be makeshift and merely appearance? We are so far agreed, but we differ in our further conclusions. For I can discover no merit in an attitude which combines every vice of theory. It is forced to admit that the real world is left naked and empty; while it cannot pretend itself to support and to own the wealth of existence. Each party is robbed, and both parties are beggared.

The only positive result which has appeared from our effort to justify causation, seems to be the impossibility of isolating the cause or the effect. In endeavouring to make a defensible assertion, we have had to go beyond the connection as first we stated it. The cause A not only recedes backwards in time, but it attempts laterally to take in more and more of existence. And we are tending to the doctrine that, to find a real cause, we must take the complete state of the world at one moment as this passes into another state also complete. The several threads of causation seem, that is, always to imply the action of a background. And this background may, if we are judicious, be irrelevant practically. It may be practically irrelevant, not because it is ever idle, but because often it is identical, and so makes no special difference. The separate causes are, therefore, legitimate abstractions, and they contain enough truth to be practically admissible. But it will be added that, if we require truth in any strict sense, we must confine ourselves to one entire state of the world. This will be the cause, and the next entire state will be the effect.

There is much truth in this conclusion, but it remains indefensible. This tendency of the separate cause to pass beyond itself cannot be satisfied, while we retain the relational form essential to causation. And we may easily, I think, convince ourselves of this. For, in the first place, a complete state of existence, as a whole, is at any one moment utterly impossible. Any state is forced by its content to transcend itself backwards in a regress without limit. And the relations and qualities of which it is composed will refer themselves, even if you keep to the moment, for ever away from themselves into endless dissipation. Thus the complete state, which is necessary, cannot be reached. And, in the second place, there is an objection which is equally fatal. Even if we could have one self-comprised condition of the world preceding another, the relation between them would still be irrational. We assert something of something else; we have to predicate B of A, or else its sequence of A, or else the one relation of both. But in these cases, or in any other case, can we defend our assertion? It is the old puzzle, how to justify the attributing to a subject something other than itself, and which the subject is not. If “ followed by B” is not the nature of A, then justify your predication. If it is essential to A, then justify, first, your taking A without it; and in the next place show how, with such an incongruous nature, A can succeed in being more than unreal appearance. And we may perhaps fancy at this point that a door of exit is opened. How will it be, since the difference is the source of our trouble, if we fall back upon the identity

of cause and effect? The same essence of the world, persisting in unchanged self-conservation from moment to moment, and superior to diversity-this is perhaps the solution. Perhaps; but, if so, what has been done with causation? So far as I am able to understand, that consists in the differences and in their sequence in time. Mere identity, however excellent, is emphatically not the relation of cause and effect. Either then once more you must take up the problem of reconciling intelligibly the diversity with the unity, and this problem so far has shown itself intractable. Or you yourself have arrived at the same conclusion with ourselves. You have admitted that cause and effect is irrational appearance, and cannot be reality.

I will add here a difficulty, in itself superfluous, which comes from the continuity of causal change. Its succession, on the one hand, must be absolutely without pause; while, on the other hand, it cannot be so. This dilemma is based upon no new principle, but is a mere application of the insoluble problem of duration. The reader who is not attracted may pass on. For our perception change is not properly continuous. It cannot be so, since there are durations which do not come to us as such; and however our faculties were improved, there must always be a point at which they would be transcended. On the other hand, to speak of our succession as being properly discrete seems quite as indefensible. It is in fact neither the one nor the other. I presume that what we notice is events with time between them, whatever that may mean. But, on the other hand, when we deal with pieces of duration, as wholes containing parts and even a variable diversity of parts, the other aspect comes up. And, in the end, reflection compels us to perceive that, however else it may appear, all change must really be continuous. This conclusion cannot imply that no state is ever able to endure for a moment. For, without some duration of the identical, we should have meaningless chaos, or, rather, should not have even that. States may endure, we have seen, so long as we abstract. We take some partial state, or aspect of a state, which in itself does not alter. We fix one eye upon this, while we cast, in fear of no principle, our other eye upon the succession that goes with it, and so is called simultaneous. And we solve practically in this way the problem of duration. We have enduring aspects, A, B, C, one after the other. Alongside of these there runs on a current of changes minutely subdivided. This goes on altering, and in a sense it alters A, B, C, while in another sense they are unchanged pieces of duration. They do not alter in themselves, but in relation to other changes they are in constant internal lapse. And, when these other changes have reached a certain point of alteration, then A passes into

without any change. In short, if the cause can endure unchanged for any the very smallest piece of duration, then it must endure for ever. It cannot pass into the effect, and it therefore is not a cause at all. On the other hand, (b) Causation cannot be continuous. For this would mean that the cause was entirely without duration. It would never be itself except in the time occupied by a line drawn across the succession. And since this time is not a time, but a mere abstraction, the cause itself will be no better. It is unreal, a nonentity, and the whole succession of the world will consist of these nonentities. But this is much the same as to suppose that solid things are made of points and lines and surfaces. These may be fictions useful for some purposes, but still fictions they remain. The cause must be a real event, and yet there is no fragment of time in which it can be real. Causation is therefore not continuous; and so, unfortunately, it is not causation, but mere appearance.

The reader will understand at once that we have repeated here the old puzzle about time. Time, as we saw, must be made, and yet cannot be made, of pieces. And he perhaps will not be sorry to have reached an end of these pages through which I have been forced to weary him with continuity and discreteness. In the next chapter we shall arrive at somewhat different matter.

From *Appearance and Reality* (1893, 1897) by F.H. Bradley (1846–1924).
Book I. Appearance. Chapter VI “Causation”.