

Class 3: Indian Philosophy

Joanna Macy:

One-way causality in Indian thought (p. 15)

Notes:

The Vedas, of the second and first millennia, BCE (long before the Buddha's time)

Seeking the rta, or order underlying all phenomena, the postulation was made that change can be understood in terms of a potency inherent in these phenomena. Svadha, or own power—that is, a power or property inherent in the cause to produce the effect. As such it stands in clear contrast to the Aristotelian, Thomist, and Newtonian notion that change requires an external agent. Yet, as in the west, this causation was seen as operating in a one-way fashion independent of other variables and unaltered by its own effects.

Four views of causality:

The effect is inherent in the cause

29: Reciprocal causality appears to be perceived more readily by the mythic than the philosophic mentality. (As in the Vedic ritual of sacrifice and fire: order and power are sustained in their operation by the reciprocal response of the life forms they occasion. The fire sacrifice nourishes, feeds back to, the gods that which their existence makes possible, and which they in turn require for their own continuity and efficacy.) For this causal notion yields apparent paradoxes—cause turns into effect; the doer, by the doing, is done unto; hunter becomes prey. Implicit in mythic causality is the creative interplay of opposites...Because the mythic apprehension of reality, by virtue of its roots and forms, is less subject to linear causal assumptions, it has been able to reconcile polarities with greater ease than has rational discourse.

Story logic is often non-linear.

[End notes]

Intro:

Last week we looked at predominant traditional Western views of cause and effect.

What are your questions about what we've covered so far?

You'll recall the two major views were those of Heraclitus, *everything flows, reality as process and flow*. and Parmenides, All reality is one, change is impossible, existence is timeless, uniform, and necessary. Whatever is, is, and whatever is not, cannot be...*from nothing, nothing comes*.

This view prevailed in Western philosophy, through Plato's concept of ideal forms, and the metaphor of the cave, through Aristotle's logic and the four categories of causes, and through the Christian doctrine of God as the Unmoved Mover.

But what were the models of cause and effect in India, in the time of the Buddha?

In the Buddha's time there were several prevailing philosophical views of cause and effect and many teachers with schools representing their views. Joanna Macy excludes mythic views to focus on philosophical schools, but she notes that cause and effect function differently in myth. In the Vedic ritual of sacrifice and fire, for example, the fire sacrifice nourishes, feeds back to, the gods that which their existence makes possible, and which they in turn require for their own continuity and power. But here are the main philosophical perspectives she identifies:

1. **The Vedic: Cause and effect are unidirectional.** "In the notions of *svadha* (own power) and *sat•karya•vada* (self-causation), **the effect pre-exists in the cause**. The effect represents potency inherent in the cause and unfolds and evolves from it sequentially, as curds from milk, rain from clouds. As such, effects and transformations represent new guises of the old. The logic of this view stems from the Vedic equation of the real with the immutable, an absolute aloof from change." This creates a problem: how can you relate the true and changeless to the existential experience of change? Macy explains: "The appearance of novelty was interpreted either as the ripening of a previously existing condition, or as an outright illusion. In either case, change, the realm of *maya*, is seen as that which obscures the real and deludes the mind." The distinction between the eternal, true, and absolute essence and phenomenal reality led to a distinction between substance and attribute. Change comes to be seen as the consequence of properties superimposed on the underlying essence. Whether those properties were seen as real (by the Samkhyan) or illusory (by the Upanisadic and Vedantic thinkers), they were viewed as binding and perilous to the spirit. She notes: "where an absolute is posited as the abode of pure being, it is also the locus of power and agency." (30). In the Hindu tradition, this source is Brahman....the process of phenomenal change and evolution requires the presence of the changeless, pure spirit. Change, coming from or created by an unalterable agent, is unidirectional. As Macy

points out, “this became, in non Buddhist India as it did in the West, the predominant model for causality.

2. **Carvakas and Lokayatas: *Materialist determinism*** denies an original spiritual, transcendent cause. Events can be understood in terms of inherent properties of matter. (Many scientists hold this view, also) Some materialists held to strict determinism; the Ajivakas held a concept of fate and a material view of karma that allowed for neither will nor chance.
3. **Yadr•cchavadins. *Accidentalists*:** The soul and the world arise without a cause.

Early Buddhists categorized the various teachings and causal models into four groups:

1. **Satyam-katam** (self-caused)
2. **Param-katam** (externally or other-caused)
3. Both self and externally caused
4. Neither self nor externally caused

This is a famous fourfold set of propositions known as a quadrilemma: instead of the usual two horns of a dilemma, there are four mutually exclusive propositions. They seem airtight: there are no other possibilities, right?

Why is all of this background important? What do these views have in common, and why do they matter?

First of all, these models of cause and effect continue to predominate not only in India, but in our own society and in our personal lives today. Here are some examples:

The effect is inherent in the cause: for example, your depression is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. “Boys will be boys”

Some external cause creates the effect: his terrible work situation is causing his high blood pressure. “the tree jumped in front of my car.”

Causes are both internal and external: a bad environment and a longing to belong lead teenagers to join gangs. “Crime is a result of motive plus opportunity.”

There is no cause and effect relationship: life is full of random, unpredictable events that have no cause. We just try to explain the chaos somehow by making up cause and effect stories. “shit happens.”

We might even cycle through these explanations, especially when we have been shocked by some event or experience, searching for a cause. By now you may have guessed that none of these models are truly satisfactory.

They are also important because they have implications for power, karma, agency, and responsibility. *Karma* was already a well-established concept. And so there were different views on these topics. These views included: Karmic determinist (“due to what one did in the past”), the theistic determinist (due to creation by God”), and the indeterminist (“without cause or reason.”) Buddhists rejected all of these views.

All of these views are essentially linear: cause creates effect and that change goes in one direction only. Effects cannot modify causes. Well, it just makes sense, right?

In this respect, Indian philosophy parallels Western philosophy, as we raced through last week.

Against this backdrop, in India as well as in contemporary Western culture, Buddha provided a radically different causal vision. In the next three weeks we will explore that vision in more depth. But first, let’s consider why we ask why? It is the first question and the most persistent question we ask. It seems to me that in evolutionary terms, the answers to our “why” questions had real survival value. If we knew why Thor was killed (wild tiger, marauding clan, drinking bad water), we could avoid the same fate, and we could teach our children to avoid it. The answers, no matter how incomplete, poorly informed, or even wrong they may be, soothe our existential anxiety. They help us plan, predict, prevent at least somewhat so that bad things don’t happen and good things do happen. This gives us a sense of control over our lives: our continued existence, our well-being, our success and our happiness. So much of our parenting is about teaching our children how to avoid harm and find a path to happiness or success. To do this, we are continuously vigilant about causes: causes of bullying, causes of struggles in school, causes of qualities like persistence, grit, and self-worth. If we can root out the causes of problems, we can ensure our child’s well-being and safe passage to adulthood.

At any rate, we are obsessed with causes, working backward from desirable or undesirable effects (if you had done your homework you wouldn’t have gotten a C), or working forward, projecting into the future the effects of present causes (if you don’t study harder you are going to flunk this class, which will destroy your GPA, which means you won’t get into a good college and then you will have an unhappy, unsuccessful life).

One of the things I loved about playing pool was its simplified model of cause and effect. You hit a ball with a pool cue, and it reacts in a way determined by geometry and physics. If it does not do what you expected, you did not hit it correctly according to your plan. Of course it is complicated by the presence of other balls on the table, as well as the actions of your opponent, which leave the table in a new configuration with each turn. But the satisfying click of the balls, the stillness of the array, the inevitability of missing a shot, give a kind of reassuring sense of

order in the universe. It seems there is not really any role for chance; your miss is the result of your error. The interaction of pool cue and ball seems like a perfect example of linear causality, and that is how we tend to view cause and effect. I think that is part of the game's appeal; in a tiny, orderly universe the laws of physics and geometry, of simple cause and effect, are affirmed. Nothing in our daily lives is quite like that. In fact, nothing in a game of pool is quite like that, either.

Now suppose that the balls are actually hamsters, and the pool cue is an octopus, and the pool table is a mountain range with constantly erupting volcanoes. Your job is to get the hamsters into their correct numbered burrows before they are consumed by lava. Now we're getting a little closer to life as we know it, right? As the Talking Heads famously asked: How did we get here?

Let's explore a little further together:

1. Think of three important events in your life. Take your time and be mindful. List them briefly, just so that you can recall which ones they are.
2. Think about one event, and write about the cause or causes of that event. Keep writing without stopping until I tell you to quit, even if you are writing "I don't know what else to say".
3. Thinking about the same event, write about the impact of the event on yourself and others, as far as you can discern. What happened? What changed for you? For others?

In groups of four, talk about which (if any) of the four models of causality showed up in your writing (there may be more than one):

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Causes are both internal and external: a bad environment and a longing to belong lead teenagers to join gangs. "Crime is a result of motive plus opportunity."

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[Reports]

Our cause and effect models determine how we think, speak, act, and interact; how we define problems, projects, relationships, power, responsibility, social dynamics, and activity. We blame, punish, reward, reject, respect according to these models. We dismiss, ignore, or forget whatever in the situation does not accord with our models. And most of us are frustrated by the inadequacy of our models in the confusing, complex, unpredictable worlds we inhabit. Somehow, we find ourselves in a toxic workplace, a difficult argument with a parent, a world of school shootings, racial violence, climate catastrophe, and all kinds of troubles, struggles, and difficult situations we were unable to prevent, and the causes of which we suspect we have somehow contributed. Most importantly, how can we think about being the causes of what we truly want for ourselves and the world?

In a paper I wrote years ago, I suggested that the linear model of reasoning is far too limited to describe the diverse patterns of reasoning I was observing as students were learning to build and interact in text based virtual worlds called MOOs and MUDs. I described, for example, star reasoning, spiral reasoning, story reasoning, network reasoning, spatial architectures, fractal reasoning. I'm happy to send it along if it might interest you.

I will leave you with a famous Zen koan: the story of Baizhang's fox. It is Koan 8 in the Book of Serenity:

When Baishang lectured in the hall, there was always an old man who listened to the teaching and then dispersed with the crowd. One day he didn't leave; Baizhang then asked him, "Who is it standing there?"

The old man said, "In antiquity, in the time of the ancient Buddha, Kasyapa, I lived on this mountain. a student asked, 'Does a greatly cultivated man still fall into cause and effect or not?' I answered him, 'He does not fal into cause and effect,'" an I fell into a wild fox body for five hundred lives. Now I ask the teacher to turn a word in my behalf."

Baizhang said, " he is not blind to cause and effect."

There is a more extended version as Case 2 in the Gateless Gate, provided by Guo Gu in Passing Through the Gateless Barrier: (p. 28)

