

**THE PRINCIPLE OF CAUSATION
CONSIDERED IN OPPOSITION TO
ATHEISTIC THEORIES. A LECTURE
DELIVERED IN CONNECTION WITH THE
CHRISTIAN EVIDENCE SOCIETY, JULY 19,
1872; PP. 1-47 (NOT COMPLETE)**

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The Principle of Causation Considered in Opposition to Atheistic Theories. A lecture delivered in connection with the christian evidence society, July 19, 1872; pp. 1-47 (not complete) by J. B. Mozley

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THEORIES.

BEFORE I go to my subject I will make some general remarks on metaphysics, regarded as adapted for popular thought. When people in general regard metaphysics, as they appear to do, as a curious puzzle, in which arguers give reasons for things which have nothing to do with nature or common sense, but entirely to belong to an artificial speciality created by an understanding among themselves, they should be reminded sometimes of the fact that everybody is a metaphysician, and cannot help being one. Metaphysics could not possibly have had any existence except there had been some great leading ideas in man's mind upon the foundation of which they had arisen. These elementary metaphysical ideas, then, belong to everybody; nay, and they are evidently so simple a part of our natural reason that we do not look upon them as metaphysical at all. We are aware of a certain profoundness and grandeur that belong to

them, which distinguishes them from other ideas ; but they are as perfect realities to us, at the same time, as truths of ordinary common sense. They do not belong to any fictitious world, though they raise us to another type of truths, other modes of existence in this. They are actualities of a most stupendous kind. Thus, take the first idea of this class that occurs to one—the idea of Infinity. This is a metaphysical idea ; it arises out of our own minds, it is not a copy from nature, as many images in our minds are. I need not say that we never saw any object or extent that was infinite ; it would be a contradiction to say that we had. But there is something in me by which I know antecedently that space is going on all the same as space, however differently it may be occupied, beyond my sight as within it. Having raised in my mind the largest portion of space I can, so that if I try to increase, I simply repeat it, I have still a sense of limitation. There is at the furthest line of the horizon an excess which baffles me ; which is not included in the imagined space, or it would not be an excess, and which yet belongs and is attached to it and cannot be removed ; an incipient beyond which must be endless for the very reason that it begins ; because this indefinable excess, for the very reason that it exists itself, must be succeeded by the like. Infinity, then, is a metaphysical idea ; but is it an idea without reality, without interest, without popular attractions ? On the contrary, it is

an idea which appeals vividly to our imagination, which is impelled to efforts at the pursuit of it, vain indeed, but which exalt the intelligent spirit in the very act of overpowering it. And so far from being fictitious and illusive, it is an actual attribute of this material world; it belongs to the actual space around us in such a way that we cannot by any mental effort remove it; we cannot prevent this outward material portion of space in which we are from going off into an incomprehensible mystery. Give me a fragment of space, and I can understand it; but carry this fragment itself onward, and by simply extending, simply going on, it becomes as absolute a mystery as has ever been contained in a creed. The idea of infinity has within it, as soon as men enter into it at all, a perfect romance, which all the flights of human fancy cannot overtake; the strange and insoluble enigmas of reason which come out of it act as a spell upon the imaginative curiosity of the human mind. It is thus that the ideas of metaphysicians, so far from being unreal, are bound up with this very field of vision in which we are; and so far from being artificial, dry, and technical, belong to the very mystery and romance of nature. Infinity is a fact, and at the same time a mystery. We can no more deny that there is Infinity on all sides of us, wherever we point a finger, than we can deny our eyesight; and yet what *is* material Infinity, sidereal space? endless everywhere? It is as mysterious as a spectre.

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Everybody, then, is a metaphysician, just as everybody is a poet. Just as everybody is endowed with those elementary sentiments and affections, and is influenced by those associations, which, taken up by language, become poetry; so everybody has the primary ideas and maxims of metaphysics. Even the Bible can no more be understood without the aid of these great metaphysical ideas than it can be without grammar.

So, when we take up the idea of Cause, which is the foundation of so large a branch of metaphysical argument, we go at once to an idea which is one of the most obvious of all our principles of thought, and which appeals to us as most simple and rudimentary truth. It is a self-evident maxim that every event must have a cause. After contemplating any event in life or nature, I find myself going in thought beyond it, to consider how it came to pass; by some instinctive law, some constitutional motion inherent in my mind, I go in the direction of a cause of that event; something not merely antecedent to it, but which stands in such a relation to it as that, in consequence of it, that event or thing exists. The intellect pushes on to this resting-place, as a satisfaction of its own indigenous want and desire. It is evidently upon this principle that we entirely depend for the slightest real connexion between the present, the past, and the future; otherwise, and but for this principle, this whole connexion is

annihilated. Is it, can we imagine it to be indeed the case, that anything can in a moment begin to exist without there being any cause for it? Then no link whatever exists between one event in the universe and another; the whole concatenation of things falls to pieces, and the whole fabric of the world is dissolved, other than as a mere spectacle to the eye. Everything is perfectly independent, has nothing to do with anything else, begins of itself and ends of itself.

But when we look into the idea of Cause, we find immediately that it involves the most astonishing thoughts and conceptions. We cannot help ourselves having it, we cannot help ourselves being bound by the necessity of it, we cannot release ourselves from its grasp; but it is at the same time such an unfathomable idea that we pause under the impress of it, and feel ourselves under some great solemnizing shadow as soon as we enter into this region of thought. As soon as the gates of the awful kingdom of Causation have unclosed, we are instantly upon, I will not say magic ground, for that is to convey a sense of illusion and unreality, but upon mysterious ground; and we are in company with majestic, inconceivable ideas, which we cannot grasp, and yet cannot do else than accept. For while the movement *towards* a cause is part of my rational nature, I find on reflection that I can form no distinct conception of what a cause is. What is that of which existence is the necessary fruit and

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result? We can form no idea of what goes on previous to, and with infallible cogency and force for producing existence. All this preliminary agency is entirely hid from us, and our faculties completely stop short of it. The order of nature puts before us an endless succession of antecedents, but in no one instance can we see any necessary connexion between the antecedent and its consequent. But though we cannot raise the distinctive conception of what a cause is, we are not the less absolutely certain that there must be a cause, and that nothing can take place without one.

Again, the very first consequence of this idea of cause, and one which is implied necessarily in the very conception of a cause, is a result which appals us by its tremendous inconceivability; and yet it is a truth of the most absolute and obvious necessity; nay, it is an absolute and certain fact, which every single rational being, whether he is a believer in religion or not, must accept as simply and unreservedly as he does the evidence of his senses; and that is, that from all eternity something has existed. "This is so evident and undeniable a proposition," says Samuel Clarke, "that no Atheist in any age has ever presumed to assert the contrary. For since something now is, it is manifest that something always was. For whatever now is has a cause, a reason, a ground of its existence—a foundation on which its existence relies, a ground or reason why it doth exist, rather than not exist,

and this foundation [of a thing which has come into existence] must have existed before it. That something, therefore, has really existed from all eternity is one of the certainest and most evident truths in the world, acknowledged by all men and disputed by none. Yet as to the manner how it can be, there is nothing in nature more difficult for the mind of man to conceive than this very first plain and self-evident truth. For how anything can have existed eternally, that is, how an eternal duration can be now actually past, is a thing utterly as impossible for our narrow understandings to comprehend as anything that is not an express contradiction can be imagined to be. And yet to deny the truth of the proposition, that an eternal duration is now actually past, would be to assert something far more unintelligible, even an express and real contradiction."

The idea of cause is thus the key to an eternal past, which has contained being of some kind or another. By means of that necessary *regress* which exists in the idea, this mental principle holds the entrance into that interminable and infinite retrospect, which in metaphysical terms is called the *ex parte ante* eternity. There the vista is; and so long as it is true that every event must have a cause, it must exist—this unceasing past duration, going back endlessly and for ever. An Atheist and a Materialist has this endless past that he must look back upon, just as much as a believer in a God has. In his view the action of matter goes