
The 'First Cause' in Hume's Philosophy

Hume'un Felsefesinde 'İlk Neden'

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Abstract: Hume accepts and discusses two kinds of 'causes' in his writings. One of them causes is the particular cause. The other which Hume discusses is the cause that can be perceived in everywhere in the universe. As is commonly known, Hume constructs the theoretical foundation of 'cause' and 'causality' in his first two books, namely *Treatise of Human Nature* and *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. But in his later books, especially in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and *Natural History of Religion*, Hume, discusses the cause of the universe. In this paper we will discuss whether can we define this second kind of cause 'cause' as the 'first cause' or not. It looks that Hume uses the expression "first cause of all" not only in epistemological sense but also to denote a theological meaning.

Keywords: Hume, theism, the first cause, God, natural religion.



Hume, accepts two causes when he tries to grasp the meaning of the happenings in the universe, he adopts the idea of two causes. The first of these is the cause of individual objects. The other is immanent cause in the whole universe. Thus what we discussed in this paper is: “Is it possible to relate these causes to God in any possible way?” Let us point out that Hume tries to develop his theory of causality in all of his writings. Not only in his early writings like *Treatise* and *Enquiry* but also in his later writings on religion.

In his later writings such as *Dialogues* and *Natural History of Religion* he uses the term ‘cause’ in a different meaning. It can be clearly seen that he uses this term in the meaning which theologians use of the ‘*first cause*’. For instance, Hume, differentiates the theists from the polytheists in his *Natural History of Religion* as saying “whoever learns by argument, the existence of invisible intelligent power from the admirable contrivance of natural objects, and must suppose the world to be the workmanship of that divine being, the original cause of all things” (Hume, 1947a: 325). While using the phrase ‘original cause of all things’ it seems he uses it in the meaning of the ‘*first cause*’ of Greek philosophers. In the concluded part of *Natural History of Religion* he says “a purpose, an intention, a design is evident in everything; and when our comprehension is so far enlarged as to contemplate the first rise of that system, we must adopt, with the strangest conviction, the idea of some intelligent cause or author.” (1964: 361) Here we can claim easily while using the concept ‘cause’ he means God. Now let us take the terms *individual causes* and *first cause* into consideration and see whether they are used in theological sense or not.

Hume says in the second part of his book titled *Natural History of Religion* that there are two ways in observing the happenings in the universe. The first is to look at the effects of events of nature in human life, then to determine the *cause*. The second is to think that the events in nature are caused by one cause and from here to reach the principle of *general cause*. According to him the first leads to polytheism, the second one to theism. (Hume, 1964: 313-4) The first causality is the causality that the individual objects form among each other. The second cause is the cause that gives rise to these causes or forms them which is usually called the *first cause*.



Since the first cause is thought to be the cause of all existence, this explains the basis of metaphysical objects. According to Hume there cannot be existence based on chance in the universe. (Hume, 1975: 56) In the second Section of *Dialogues*, Philo talks about a final cause of the universe. He says that "(n)othing exists without a cause; and the original cause of this universe (whatever it be) we call God; and piously ascribe to him every species of perfection." (Hume, 1947a: 142). In addition, Philo points out that it would be strange to not accept these. (Hume, 1947a: 142) Hume expresses a similar view in *Enquiry* and says this: "(i)t is universally allowed that nothing exists without a cause of its existence, and that chance, when strictly examined, is a mere negative word, and means not any real power which has anywhere a being in nature." (1975: 95)

Likewise, Hume says in *Treatise* that it is an obvious contradiction to say that something has an existence without its cause. He says, "according to my definitions, necessity makes an essential part of causation; and consequently liberty, by removing necessity, removes also causes, and is the very same thing with change." (Hume, 1978: 407) That's to say, necessity means causation, freedom means chance. However, even if Hume denies accident and chance, he says that this 'first cause' is incomprehensible, which he accepts to be the basic reason for the universe. Hume considers this 'first cause' an idea. To him, "(o)ur ideas reach no further than our experience: We have no experience of divine attributes and operations." (Hume, 1947a: 142-3)

It is possible to openly say that Hume does not approve of accident and chance in the universe. He makes Philo character say that in DCNR: "Every thing is surely governed by steady, inviolable laws. And where the inmost essence of things laid open to us, we should then discover a scene, of which, at present, we can have no idea. Instead of admiring the order of natural beings, we should clearly see that it was absolutely impossible for them, in the smallest article, ever to admit of any other disposition." (Hume, 1947a: 174-5).

Likewise, Demea says in *Dialogues* "(c)hance is a word without a meaning" (Hume, 1947a: 189). According to Hume, accident or chance does not have a real equivalent in nature. In this situation, either says chance for the order in nature or necessity. Hume is already not interest-



ed in why the order in universe is so; instead he is interested in how it is formed through both himself and one of his characters in the *Dialogues*. Hume does not find it possible for us to comprehend the ‘first cause’. Because we have no experience over it. It is clearly seen that what Hume expresses here for the ‘first cause’ says about the essence of God in *Dialogues* and *Enquiry*. He says for the ‘first cause’: “These words, *generation, reason*, mark only certain powers and energies in nature, whose effects are known, but whose essence is incomprehensible; and one of these principles more than the other, has no privilege for made being a standard to whole of nature.” (Hume, 1947a: 178) Whatever this ‘first cause’ might be, we cannot directly get informed about it neither by our reason nor by our experience.

Now if we reconsider Philo’s and Hume’s thoughts, we can say that with the ‘first cause’ sense of God was meant. G.J. Nathan explains why Hume accepts a final reason that “(t)o say that things happen of necessity is merely another way of saying that things happen because of the natures or structural features of objects. To know those natures or essence, which we cannot do, is to know why things must be as they are. Necessity is grounded in the natures of objects.” (Nathan, 1995: 117) Hume gives an example of this through Philo’s words. It can be thought for ordinary observers that the order formed by the arithmetic relations between the numbers is an effect of accident. According to Philo, a master mathematician knows that this is the result of necessity. And he asks why not possible for the whole universe to be an effect of the necessity. According to Philo, if we knew the natural structures of objects, we would see that it is impossible for them to have other inclinations. (Hume, 1947a: 191)

Nathan evaluates this point like that “(t)he claims that nothing exists without a cause and that there is an ultimate cause is intimately related. The former denies the existence of chance and this affirms the existence of causes and necessity. But both causality and necessity are grounded in the natures of objects. Hence, to deny the existence of chance is to maintain that there is a basic nature of objects, or a basic principle or order. In fact, we could not say that the two claims are just two sides of the same coin, and both Philo and Hume have latched on to it” (Nathan, 1995: 118)

According to Nathan, the fact that Philo says the ultimate principle



is incomprehensible in the Dialogues (Hume, 1947a: 143) is the same thing as the fact that Hume says we cannot comprehend the first cause and cannot have an idea about it. (Nathan, 1995: 118) But because of this depending on this idea, “we must not make the mistake of thinking that because both Philo and Hume advocate the incomprehensibility thesis, they think nothing can be known of the nature of the ultimate cause. They do think that we can have an indirect knowledge of the first cause, even though no direct knowledge of it is available by means of the senses or reason.” (Nathan, 1995: 118) Nathan says because “ultimate principle is known in the same way in which any cause is: by its effects. By means of reasoning from analogy, experience, and observation.” (Nathan, 1995: 118)

Without doubt, Hume intends to mean God by ‘*first cause*’. Especially he mentions in his work titled *Natural History of Religion* some unknown causes whose reasons man does not know but whose effects he knows while he is on a quest for God. (Hume, 1964: 316, 334.) We can say that these *unknown cause* or *causes* are nothing but God whom we can know only through the reflections in universe. However according to Hume, every activity done to research this *cause* does not guide us the true sense of God. He states in *Natural History of Religion* that this quest can be in two forms. He makes this distinction by basing on the person's point of view. To him, (1) “Where men led into the apprehension of invisible, intelligent power by a contemplation of works of nature, they could never possible entertain any conception but of one single being, who bestowed existence and order on this vast machine, and adjusted all its parts, according to one regular plan or connected system.” (Hume, 1964: 313) Because “If, leaving the work of nature, we trace the footsteps of invisible power in the various and contrary events of human life” or; (2) “we are necessarily led into polytheism and to the acknowledgment of several limited and imperfect deities.” (Hume, 1964: 314)

Moreover, while he talks about theism he mentions a “real theism and religion”. (Hume, 1964: 309) As he compares monotheism with polytheism, he defines polytheists as atheists. Hume who talks about a sense of God that is supposed to be believed defines people believing in genies, demons and fairies as ‘*pretended religionists*’ and ‘*superstitious atheists*’ in *Natural History of Religion*. It seems that when he says “acknowledge no



being that corresponds to our idea of a deity.” (Hume, 1964: 320) He does not accept himself as ‘*pretended religionists*’ or ‘*superstitious atheists*’. He criticizes these polytheists in the sense of religion, which is not compatible with his sense of religion for three reasons. To Hume they are atheists, because this theology, has “(n)o first principle of mind or thought: No supreme government and administration: no divine contrivance or intention in the fabric of the world.” (Hume, 1964: 320)

Now, after all it seems that we can say Hume (or Philo) accepts the following thoughts about *cause* or *causality*: (1) Everything exists with a *cause*. (2) There is a *first* or *ultimate cause* of the universe. (3) We can say that this *cause* is God, as well as the *first cause* or *general principle*.(4) The essence of the *ultimate cause* is incomprehensible. That is to say we cannot know the attributes of God. For we have no any experience concerning this *ultimate cause*. That is why; we cannot make a judgment on him.

In conclusion we can say that Hume openly accepts that the universe must or should have a cause and he also considers this cause God. Because as mentioned above, the definitions that he brought to the first principle or general cause in *Enquiry* and *Treatise* are completely compatible with the commentaries that he made on God in terms of the cause of the universe in the books titled *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and *Natural History of Religion*. Hume has an epistemology that both ‘individual causes’ and ‘ultimate cause’ are not directly comprehensible. It can be said that he thinks the same thing for God too. For this reason, we can say that Hume’s conception of causality does not reject God, but he accepts that we can have limited knowledge about God.

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Özet: Özet: Hume çalışmalarında iki türlü 'neden' kabul etmektedir. Bunlardan biri tek tek varlıkların nedenleridir. Diğeri de evrenin her yerinden çıkarabileceğimiz bir nedendir. Yaygın olarak bilindiği gibi nedensellik kuramına dair düşüncelerini ilk iki eseri olan *Treatise of Human Nature* ve *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* isimli çalışmasında şekillendirir. Fakat daha sonraki iki temel çalışması olan *Natural History of religion* ve *Dialogues Concernin Natural Religion* kitaplarında Hume evrenin nedeni hakkında tartışmalara yer verir. Bu çalışmada Hume'un bu ikinci tür 'neden'ini bir tür 'ilk neden' olarak tanımlayabilip tanımlanamayacağımızı tartıştık. Öyle anlaşılıyor ki Hume "her şeyin ilk nedeni" kavramını salt epistemolojik anlamdan çok teolojik bir anlamda kullanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hume, teizm, ilk neden, Tanrı, doğal din.

