

Introduction

You threw not, when you threw.

(Qur'an 8:17)

God's free will has given existence to our free will / His free will is like a rider
 beneath the dust / His free will creates our free will / His commands are founded
 upon a free will within us.

(Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, V. 3087–3038)

In this book, I examine different accounts of causality formulated by Muslim theologians, philosophers, and mystics. The book also includes examinations of how they established freedom in the created order as an extension of their perception of causality. Based on this examination, I identify and explore some of the major currents in the debate on causality and freedom. I also discuss the possible implications of Muslim perspectives on causality for contemporary debates over religion and science. The central figures examined in this book are early Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite theologians, Ibn Sīnā (980–1037), Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111), Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (1154–1191), Ibn Rushd (1126–1198), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1149–1209), Muḥyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240), Ṣadraddīn al-Qūnawī (1210–1274), Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī (1260–1350), al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī (1340–1413), Mullā Ṣadrā (1571–1640), and Saīd Nursi (1877–1960).

WHY CAUSALITY AND FREEDOM?

What is the nature of relationship between cause and effect?¹ Is this relationship necessary or contingent? To what extent do humans and other entities have causal efficacy? What is the metaphysical basis of the causal efficacy of entities? How can one square the divine will, knowledge, and omnipotence with human freedom? These and similar questions about causality and freedom are fundamentally important for any religion for many reasons, a few of which can be mentioned here.

First, the way one understands causal relations in the natural world has fundamental implications for many contentious theological and philosophical questions. This understanding informs one's perception of the God-and-cosmos relationship. This perception, in turn, has important implications for one's conception of the relationship between God and the individual. Our convictions as to whether causal relations are necessary or contingent shape our thinking about freedom and consciousness

¹ The word for cause is *sabab* or *'illa*. *Sabab* in classical dictionaries means a “bond,” a “rope,” or a “way” that is used to connect or tie two things together. Cause (*sabab*) is that to which effect is tied or with which one could attain or arrive at effect (*musabbab*, *mu'aththir*). See, for example, Tahānawī, *Kashshāf Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Funūn*, ed. Ali Dahruj (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnan, 1996), II, 924; Ibn al-Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dar Sadr, n.d.), I, 458–459; Jurjānī, *Kitāb al-Ta'rifāt* (Lipsiae: Sumptibus F. C. G. Vogelii, 1845), 121; Firūzābādī, *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* (Beirut: Muassasat al-Risala, 1986), I, 295; Ibn Fūrak, *Kitāb al-Ḥudūd fi-l-Uṣūl*, ed. Muhammad Sulaymani (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1999), 159–160. The word *sabab* is used in the Qur'an in both singular (*sabab*) and plural form (*asbāb*). Again, in the Qur'anic context, it usually means that which relates two things to each other (22/15; 18/84–85, 89–92; 2/166; 38/10, 40/36–37). *'Illa* means “illness,” “cause,” “genesis,” “excuse,” etc. The term is not mentioned in the Qur'an. Ash'arite and Mu'tazilite theologians generally use the concepts of *sabab* and *'illa* interchangeably. Qāḍī 'Abduljabbār and Nisābūrī, however, make a distinction between *sabab* and *'illa* on the basis of the notion of necessity. *'Illa* implies a necessary relationship between cause and effect, whereas *sabab* refers to a volitional relationship. See, for example, Qāḍī 'Abduljabbār, *al-Mughnī fi Abwābi al-'Adl wa-l-Tawhīd*, 16 vols. ed. Ibrahim Madkur, Taha Husayn, and various editors (Cairo: al-Dar al-Misriyya, 1962–5), IX, 48–50; Nisābūrī, *al-Masā'il fi-l-Khilāf bayn al-Baṣriyyīn wa-l-Baghdādīyyīn*, ed. Ridwan Sayyid and Ma'n Ziyada (Beirut: Ma'had al-Inma al-Arabi, 1979), 70. Similarly, Ibn Ḥazm (994–1064) argues that the concepts of *sabab* and *'illa* can be distinguished on the basis of their separability from the effect. *Sabab* can be separated from effect, as is the case in the relationship of an agent and his acts. *'Illa*, however, occurs necessarily together with its effect such as fire-flame or fire-heat. It appears that *'illa* has more necessitarian implications than *sabab*. *Sabab* refers to an agent who could exist separately before and after its effect, whereas *'illa* necessitates and occurs together with its effects. See Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Iḥkām fi Uṣūl al-Aḥkām* (Beirut: Dar al-Afak al-Jadid, 1980), I, 41. Cf. Osman Demir, *Kelamda Nedensellik: İlk Dönem Kelamcılarında Tabiat ve İnsan* (Istanbul: TC Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2015), 23–24.

and the answers we give to theological problems of theodicy and eschatology.

Second, the question of causality bears significantly on spiritual and mystic tendencies that are usually distinguished by their accentuation of the divine presence in the world, a presence that is itself grounded in a particular conception of causality. A distant God located at the origin of a long chain of causality is usually rejected by mystics of most religions. Since our perception of causality also shapes our understanding of the God-and-individual relationship, it influences one's spiritual state in religious observances and rituals.

Third, the question of causality is linked with discussions of logic and epistemology. For example, one of the premises of classical logic is that the consistent sequential relationships between cause and effect constitute a valid basis for demonstrative syllogism. Ash'arite occasionalism, however, is skeptical about the necessity of these relations due several theological reasons examined in this book. In the case of Muslim occasionalists, their doubt regarding the necessary connection between cause and effect appears to have led to a type of "empiricism" in which the deductive tendencies of Aristotelian logic and the concept of universals were questioned and finally rejected. This also led to lively discussion on the difference between mental constructions and extramental reality.

Fourth, the question of causality bears significantly on debates over religion and science. One of the challenges in this field is to have theories of causality that preserve the rigor of the scientific method as well as a sense of the divine presence in the world. Construction of such theories requires a solid understanding of the profound nature of causality.

The question of how to establish freedom in the created and divine order is also fundamentally important for any religion to ground human autonomy, moral agency, and responsibility. Reconciliation of creaturely freedom with God's omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, and predestination is one of the main problems heavily debated among Muslim theologians, philosophers, and mystics for centuries. This is one of the cornerstones of all theological and philosophical thinking, for without freedom, concepts such as accountability, judgement, revelation, the divine commands-prohibitions, and justice appear to collapse.

One can also trace the implications of convictions about causality and freedom to such diverse fields as politics and economics. It would not be an exaggeration to say that conscious or unconscious presumptions about causality and freedom form an ever-present background and influence one's answers to these and similar questions in many areas of life.

THE SELECTION OF THE THINKERS

There are several reasons why I have chosen the abovementioned thinkers as the focus of this study. First of all, these exceptional figures have long received and will likely continue to see extensive attention throughout the Muslim world. Their viewpoints, therefore, are particularly significant.

Second, these scholars can be seen as some of the most important representatives of the best-known philosophical, theological, and spiritual schools and tendencies in the Islamic tradition. For instance, the early Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite theologians Ghazālī, Jurjānī, Rāzī, and Nursi could be included in the category of the *mutakallimūn*, usually translated as “the theologians.” Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rushd are regarded as the major representatives of the Peripatetic school of Islamic philosophy (*mashshā' iyyūn*), which attempts to synthesize the tenets of Aristotelianism, Neoplatonism, and Islamic revelation. Suhrawardī and Mullā Ṣadrā belong to the Illuminationists (*ishrāqiyyūn*), who aim to harmonize experiential aspects of spirituality and theoretical aspects of philosophy. Ibn 'Arabī, Qūnawī, and Qayṣarī are considered among the most illustrious representatives of Sufi metaphysics and theosophy. A study of their thought will thus contribute to our understanding of how major schools in the Islamic tradition approach questions of causality and freedom.

Third, as will be argued, these scholars make significant contributions to the debate on causality and freedom. To explore the emergence and development of occasionalist accounts, I examine the earlier discussion among Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite theologians. Ibn Sīnā's philosophy offers an analysis of the issue from both metaphysical and physical perspectives. His concepts of existence (*wujūd*) and essence (*māhiyya*) provide a metaphysical framework that deeply influenced the Philosophers' and Sufis' accounts in later centuries. Ghazālī's writings show how an occasionalist response can be formulated against Ibn Sīnā. Although Ghazālī mostly repeats previous Ash'arite theologians' arguments, he also introduces a novel application of the principle of “preponderance without reason,” which then becomes one of the backbones of occasionalism in the middle period. He also manages to raise some important challenges to Ibn Sīnā's synthesis of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic ideas on causality, which in turn influenced Ibn Rushd's thought. Ghazālī focuses on the theological aspect of the discussion and remains uninterested in the cosmological challenges of Ibn Sīnā's physics. Rāzī takes up the challenge and responds to Ibn Sīnā's hylomorphism by using Euclidian geometry and develops a

list of novel arguments for a defense of atomism. Rāzī's response and Jurjānī's contributions led to the emergence of an occasionalist philosophy of science marked by a pragmatic-cum-skeptic attitude toward dominant scientific models. Ibn Rushd was important for reformulating and developing certain aspects of Ibn Sīnā's synthesis after Ghazālī's criticism. Suhrawardī's writings provide an evaluation of the issue through the use of the analogy of light and suggest that the ground of all causality is the radiation of the divine light upon the essences and that secondary causality is efficacious due to those essences' participation in the divine light. Ibn 'Arabī presents a participatory account of causality by starting from the concept of existence and also integrates certain occasionalist elements within the larger context of his metaphysics. Ibn 'Arabī's followers Qūnawī and Qayṣarī offer in their writings more philosophical evaluation of some ideas attributed to the Philosophers, such as secondary causality and emanation, and of ideas attributed to Ash'arites, such as continuous creation, breaks in the divine habits, and preponderance. Their writings suggest that later representatives of Sufi metaphysics selectively appropriated ideas defended by different schools by using the philosophical possibilities suggested by the concepts of existence and essence. Mullā Ṣadrā's writings provide insights into how the questions of causality and freedom were evaluated in later Islamic philosophy. Nursi's account is an interesting case in terms of its contemporary appropriation of occasionalism. Nursi also puts occasionalism in conversation with Sufi metaphysics and elaborates the concept of causal disproportionality, which can be regarded as a novel development within the occasionalist tradition. These cases, it is hoped, will allow us to see the emergence, development, continuities, discontinuities, and adaptability of the occasionalist and participatory accounts of causality and more synthetic approaches.

I have tried to follow a contextualist approach while examining these scholars. When I explore occasionalist accounts, for example, I have attempted to describe the salient features of the larger theological framework in which this theory of causality emerged and developed. Hence, the emergence of the occasionalist theory is examined from the perspective of the general Ash'arite conception of the God-cosmos relationship and from the perspective of the overall tendency of the 'Ash'arite' school to transform the notion of "possibility" into a *modus operandi* for thinking about all theological, philosophical, and cosmological questions in order to preserve both the divine will and freedom. Similarly, I have sought to understand participatory accounts and other hybrid models within the

larger metaphysical framework in which they were constructed. Hence, in all these cases, I start my analyses from the notions of existence (*wujūd*) and essence (*māhiyya*), which provide rich perspectives on the questions of causality and freedom, allow interesting interactions between different accounts of causality, and lead to powerful syntheses.

I am aware that my treatment of the questions of causality and freedom in this book is neither definitive nor exhaustive. Many more books and articles will be needed before justice is done to a subject as complex as this one. However, I am confident that this book will advance our understanding on the topic. By the end, I hope to have convinced the reader that discussions of causality and freedom in Islamic intellectual history are wide ranging, important, and still relevant.

A SPECTRUM OF THEORIES ON CAUSALITY

It will be argued in the forthcoming pages that Muslim philosophers, theologians, and mystics elaborated an array of theories on causality. A closer study of these theories allows us to identify and explore certain major trends among them.

The first of these trends is the *occasionalist* tradition. The emergence and development of this tradition will be examined extensively in the following chapters. Occasionalist accounts often claim that finite beings do not have causal efficacy. God creates both cause and effect and attaches them to each other in a self-imposed habitual pattern. There is no necessary connection between cause and effect; there is only constant conjunction. As examined in the Chapter 1, the development of these accounts was closely linked to discussions taking place in the early period on the relationship between the divine attributes and God, the Qur'anic emphasis on divine freedom and sovereignty, and an atomistic cosmology. The accentuation of the divine will and freedom leads to denial of any type of necessity in God or in the world. The idea of necessity is replaced with the notion of possibility. The concept of possibility, then, becomes the central tenet of the occasionalist worldview, shaping its convictions from epistemology and eschatology to morality and prophetology.

There are also different versions of *participatory* accounts. These accounts usually assimilate Aristotelian understanding of causality within the larger context of participatory understanding of causality. How Muslim philosophers and mystics have integrated these accounts within larger metaphysical frameworks will be examined in detail in the

following chapters. At this point, a short introduction to some of the basic convictions of Platonic and Neoplatonic participatory and Aristotelian accounts may prove beneficial for grasping the spectrum of ideas about causality examined in this book.

Different versions of participatory accounts can be found in Platonic and Neoplatonic thought. Plato accepts the existence of the Forms such as the Beautiful, the Good, the Just, and so on, and employs them as explanations for all other things. “When it was agreed that each of the Forms existed,” then “other things acquire their name by having a share in them.”² Things are the way they are because they participate in the Forms.³ A thing is beautiful because it partakes in the Beautiful, or because the Beautiful is present in that beautiful thing.⁴ The Beautiful is “itself by itself with itself, it is always in one form; and all the other beautiful things share in that, in such a way that when those others come to be or pass away, this does not become the least bit smaller or greater nor suffer any change.”⁵ Hence “all beautiful things are beautiful by the Beautiful,”⁶ and all free things are free by the Free, all powerful things are powerful by the Powerful, and so on. This logic implies that the Forms are causes of their manifestations in the sensible realm: “Once one has seen it (the form of the Good), one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything.”⁷

What exactly is the participation of the object in the Form? Some of Plato’s writings and the later Neoplatonic tradition do attempt to answer this question. At the beginning of *Parmenides*, Parmenides asks Socrates how the Forms participate in individual entities.⁸ If they do so as a whole then the Forms are separate from themselves. Therefore, the Forms must exist in entities only in part. This also suggests a gradational structure in the world, in which entities participate in the Forms in differing degrees.

² Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper with introduction and notes, ass. ed. D. S. Hutchinson (Cambridge, UK: Hackett, 1997), *Phaedo*, 102b.

³ The Forms also make knowledge possible. There has to be something permanent in this world of flux: “it is not even reasonable to say that there is such a thing as knowledge, Cratylus, if all things are passing on and none remain . . . But if there is always that which knows and that which is known, if there are such things as the beautiful, the good, and each one things that are, it does not appear to me that these things can be all like flowings or motions as we were saying just now they were.” *Cratylus*, 440. b.

⁴ Plato, *Complete Works: Phaedo*, 100d. ⁵ Plato, *Complete Works: Symposium*, 211b.

⁶ Plato, *Complete Works: Phaedo*, 100d. ⁷ Plato, *Complete Works: Republic*, 517b.

⁸ “Tell me this: it is your view that there are certain forms from which these other things, by getting share of them, derive their names. . . .” “It certainly is,” Socrates replied. Plato, *Complete Works: Parmenides*, 131a.

For instance, not everything participates in the Beautiful to the same degree. This is why one can “start from the beautiful things” and use them like “rising stairs”⁹ to “see the divine Beauty in itself,” which is “absolute, pure, unmixed, not polluted by human flesh, colors, or any other great nonsense of mortality.”¹⁰ Thus, someone who “believes in the beautiful itself can see both it and the things that participate in it and does not believe that participants are it or that it itself is the participants.” This person “is very much awake.”¹¹

In *Parmenides*, Plato introduces the One as the ground of the Forms. To participate in the Forms is to participate in the One. Yet, this participation does not make entities identical with the One. They are situated between being and not-being, for entities participate simultaneously in being and not-being. “Or, can you find a more appropriate place to put them (beings) then intermediate between being and not being? So, they cannot be more than what is or not be more than what is not, for apparently nothing is darker than what is not or clearer than what is.”¹² Because of this intermediacy, entities do not belong to either being or not being. “What participates in both being and not being and cannot correctly be called purely one or the other.”¹³ This implies a shadow-like quality in entities between pure and unpolluted being and absolute not-being. Entities participate in being but are not the absolute and pure being. “In between the being that is indivisible and always changeless, and the one that is divisible and comes to be in the corporeal realm, he mixed a third, intermediate form of being, derived from the other two . . . each part remaining a mixture of the Same, the Different, and of Being.”¹⁴

We see a similar approach in the Neoplatonic tradition to the question of participation. Plotinus writes that all beings (*panta ta onta*) owe their being to the One (*toi eni esti onta*).¹⁵ The One continuously gives us participation in its being, because the One is what it is. The One’s being is the being of all existing things. The One is “all things and none of them.”¹⁶ It is none of

⁹ Plato, *Complete Works: Symposium*, 211c. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 211e.

¹¹ Plato, *Complete Works: Republic*, 476d ¹² *Ibid.*, 479d. ¹³ *Ibid.*, 478e.

¹⁴ Plato, *Complete Works: Timeaus*, 35a–b.

¹⁵ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna. Abridged and edited by John Dillon (London: Penguin Books, 1991), VI. 9. 1. 1–2

¹⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads*, V. 2. I. 1–3 and VI. 7. 32. 12–14. Also in Plato, “Insofar as it (the One) is in the others, it would touch the others; but insofar as it is in itself, it would be kept from touching the others,” Plato, *Complete Works: Parmenides*, 148e; “the One both touches and does not touch the others and itself.” *Parmenides*, 149d.

them, because the One is undifferentiated unity and beyond multiplicity. It is all, because it must also contain them all. This makes the One “everywhere and nowhere” without qualification. Similar to Plato, Neoplatonism situates the world between the two absolutes, the One and nothingness. The world participates in both the One and nothingness.

Why do entities participate in the One? It is because they cannot be deprived of the One, for “nothing prevents it [the One] from partaking of many things.”¹⁷ Entities are also not the same as the One. “But clearly a being would partake of the One, while being something other than the One. Otherwise, it would not partake, but it would itself be the One.”¹⁸ The best way to think about this ambiguity is through the idea of participation. “And yet the others are not absolutely deprived of the One, but somehow partake of it.”¹⁹ The idea of participation suggests things are neither identical nor separate from the One. They merely participate in the One. Plotinus writes that “if anything comes from the One, it must be something different from it, and in being different, it is not one: for if it was, it would be that One.”²⁰

In *Timeaus*, Plato also asserts that the Good shares its being with other entities to bring them into being. It is in the definition of the Good to share its goodness and its being. “Don’t you in fact call getting a share of being ‘coming to be?’”²¹ Being is, then, something given to things. “So, has being been distributed to all things, which are many, and is it missing from none of the beings, neither the smallest nor the largest? . . . How could being be missing from any of the beings? In no way . . . So being is chopped up into beings of all kinds from the smallest to the largest possible, and is the most divided thing of all; and parts of being are countless.”²² Neoplatonism agrees with this account. The world proceeds from the Good, as “good diffuses itself” (*bonum diffusivum sui*). The One does not keep its perfection to itself and does not begrudge possible beings a share in its perfection.²³ It is this act of bestowal of being that allows entities to participate in the being of the One.

¹⁷ Plato, *Complete Works: Parmenides*, 160e. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 158a.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 157c. “Therefore, the One will be like and unlike the others – insofar as it is different, like, insofar as it is like, different.” *Parmenides*, 148c.

²⁰ Plotinus, *Enneads*, V. 3. 15. 35–41. ²¹ Plato, *Complete Works: Parmenides*, 156 a.

²² Plato, *Complete Works: Parmenides*, 144b.

²³ Plotinus, *Enneads*, V. 4. 1. 23. ff. This process is likened to the outflow of light from the sun. *Enneads*, V. 1. 6. 28–40, V. 3. 12. 39–44, V. 4. 1. 23–41. This also explains how unity gives rise to multiplicity. What proceeds from the One must be different from the One, and hence there is a multiplicity of things. See, for example, V. 3. 15. 1–11 and VI. 7. 8.

Moreover, it is this participation in the being of the One that is the basis of entities' causal efficacy and freedom. Even Plato's Forms rest on the ground of causality of the One. The omnipresence and immanence of the One introduces the causality of the One into all levels of the world-process.²⁴ This is why Plotinus remarks that "the One is power of all things" (*dynamis panton*). Similarly, for Plato, getting a share of being is the cause of the world-process. There is change in the world because "it partakes of (the One's) being."²⁵

The Aristotelian account of causality has profoundly influenced Muslim scholars' perception of causal relations. One of the most influential of Aristotle's ideas holds that causality is the fundamental condition of proper knowledge. The four causes (material, formal, efficient, and final) are indispensable tools for any meaningful investigation of the physical world around us.²⁶ One cannot have knowledge of a thing without grasping why a thing is what it is, the way it is, and why it cannot be other than it is.²⁷ Any student of nature has to bring the "why-question" back to all natural phenomena in the way appropriate to this causal investigation.²⁸

17–32. Matter is the point where emanation fades away into complete darkness. The outflow from the One cannot terminate until all possibilities come into existence. *Enneads*, IV. 8. 6.; V. 2. 2. 1 ff.

²⁴ This is what R. Wallis calls eidectic causality in *Neoplatonism*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1995), 126, 155. See also, Costa D'Ancona, "Plotinus and Later Platonic Philosophers on the Causality of the First Principle," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 361.

²⁵ Plato, *Complete Works: Sophist*, 256a.

²⁶ Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), *Physics* II 3 and *Metaphysics* V 2.

²⁷ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, I b 9–11; *Physics*, 194 b 17–20.

²⁸ Aristotle, *Physics*, 198 a 21–23. A good summary of Aristotelian theory of causality can be found in Andrea Falcon, "Aristotle on Causality," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/aristotle-causality/>. See also Mary Louise Gill, "Aristotle's Theory of Causal Action in *Physics* III. 3," *Phronesis*, 25 (1980), 129–147; Cynthia A. Freeland, "Aristotle on Bodies, Matter, and Potentiality," in *Philosophical Issues in Aristotle's Biology*, ed. Allan Gotthelf and James Lennox (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 392–407; Julia Annas, "Aristotle on Inefficient Causes," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 32 (1982), 311–326; Ursula Coope, "Aristotle's Account of Agency in *Physics* III.3," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, 20 (2004): 201–221.