



The Veils of Secondary Causes

Tariq Ashfaq

These secondary causes are veils upon the eyes, for not every eye is worthy of seeing His Craftsmanship.

Rumi

*The fleeting phantoms you admire today
Will soon at Heaven's behest be swept away.
O give your heart to Him Who never fails,
Who's ever with you and will ever stay.*

Jami

Below is a translation of a short chapter from an Urdu treatise *Uyun al-Ma'arif (Fountains of Wisdom)* by Shah Wahhaj al-Din Qalandar, a Sufi master of nineteenth century India.

A philosopher proceeds from the secondary causes (*asbaab*)¹ to the First Cause (*musabbib*)² without any success in the path of realization while a Sufi never fails to achieve his goal in that he goes the other way round. The secondary causes should always be viewed with reference to the standpoint of *tauhid* (Unity) or the One and Only Cause. It is quite unfortunate that man confines himself to seeing the physical causes only despite the fact that they are absolutely dependent on the *haq* (Real) and Its *tauhid* (Unity). The natural causes appear to be so, although they are not what they seem to be, due to the thick veils of ignorance (*hijaab*)³ but in truth they are identified with the Will (*iraada*) of the First Cause.

¹ "The term *secondary causes (asbaab)* refers to everything other than God that acts as a cause for something else. In other words, it refers to everything in the cosmos, beginning with the First Intellect, since there is nothing that is not the cause of something else. The term is roughly equivalent to 'things' (*ashya*) or entities (*ayaan*)". William C. Chittick, **Imaginal Worlds**, Pakistan, 2001.

² In Islamic metaphysics the cause is something which necessitates the dependence of a thing proceeding from it as its effect. By virtue of this definition the secondary causes are actually the 'effects' ensued from the First Cause. In the words of the Koran: *O men, you are in need of God, while God does not need anything.* (35:15).

³ In *Futuhaat* Ibn Arabi writes: "Causes are curtains and veils". In order to escape the deception of the immediate causes we have to lend ear to what Rumi says: "One must have an eye which cuts through secondary causes and tears aside all veils".

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A combination of a series of causes proves nothing - positive or negative. As it happens, a number of evil factors combine to form a good effect which does not necessarily imply that those factors were responsible for the said effect, rather the First Cause willed to produce such an effect which shows clearly that the secondary causes are nothing in themselves. Holding on to the natural causality tends to keep the aspirant away from the Origin (*asl*) or the First Cause, for example, an examination of the leaves of a tree may not necessarily lead him to the seed, the origin or the first cause.⁴ Unless he is able to see the leaves contained in the seed he cannot get rid of his exclusive involvement with the multiplicity of the leaves.

No miracles⁵ - prophetic or saintly, violate the norms of divine wisdom (*hikma*) or secondary causes, though they may appear to do so, but their sufficient reason that is to say the wisdom behind them is not generally made known to the common people as the extra-ordinary character of both the miracle and the miracle-worker would lose much of its value and thus be reduced to something commonplace and ordinary thereby defeating the very purpose of the miraculous phenomena (*mujizaat or kharq-i aada*)⁶. God being Wise (*hakim*)⁷ none of His Acts are devoid of wisdom but at the Axial plane, that is, where the Will (*iraada*) resides⁸, His wisdom is not perceived thanks to the highest degree of subtlety there. Moreover, the First Cause as it were produces the natural causes from the Non-Cause (*besababi*) or the Transcendent cause, for example, He commanded “Be!” (*kun*) by virtue of the same Non-Cause and the result was the production of the entities (*ta’ayyunaat*) bound together in right relationships thanks to the divine Wisdom. Even our own perceptions spring from non-perception (*bekayfi* = non-cause) so to speak.

When a thing comes into existence it descends degree by degree down to the lowest realm which is corporeal existence. Now the cause of that thing too will follow the same course getting grosser and grosser and at the same time subtler and subtler if seen from the two extremities of the *naasut* (individual) and the *laahut* (universal). If one were to trace the chain of causes of a thing it would come to an end as one ascends to the *laahut* (Non-Being), the station of Non-Perception or Non-Feeling (*bekayfi*) beyond which lies nothing.

⁴ “Day and night, the Sea keep on churning the foam. You behold the foam but not the Sea - how strange!” sings Rumi.

⁵ For Ibn Arabi miracles are ‘non-habitual signs’ which “display traces within the souls of the common people, such as earthquakes and tremblers, eclipses, the rational speech of animals, walking on water... such things are taken into account only by the common people”. William C. Chittick, **The Self-Disclosure of God**, USA, 1998. On the function of miracles Schuon observes: “What a miracle seeks to produce, and what it does indeed produce, is the rending of a veil; it operates like a surgical intervention which, far from consisting merely of an abstract discussion, removes the obstacle in a concrete way”. F. Schuon, **Logic and Transcendence**, Pakistan, 2004, p.73.

⁶ “The so-called natural laws of a lower degree of Existence can always be suspended through the intervention of a higher degree, whence the perfectly logical term ‘supernatural’; but this higher degree also has its laws, which means that the miracle is ‘natural’ on the universal scale, while being ‘supernatural’ on the earthly scale”. Ibid. p. 142.

⁷ God is called Wise (*hakim*) because He has *given each thing its creation* (20:50) and *created everything by measure* (55:49). The term *hakim* is also applicable to the universal man in a relative sense as he is capable of putting each thing in its proper place.

⁸ It will be noticed that the Axis being the Principle of movement is the exact equivalent of the Will of God. Moreover, the plane of *iraada* (Will) is higher than that of *hikma* (wisdom).

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The secondary causes should be rejected and are not to be relied upon so that one may reach the First Cause.⁹ The reality of the secondary causes lies in the divine Name *hakim* (wise) and without causality (*illa*) there is no wisdom (*hikma*), but another divine Name *Qadir* (Powerful)¹⁰ produces a Transcendent cause (saying “Be!”) out of the Non-Cause (*besababi*). With the manifestation of the divine Name *hakim*, comes the secondary causes which, however, can be taken into account provided that one never fails to see the divine Name *Qadir* and the Non-Cause as their original Source (*asl*) which contains them essentially. The secondary cause (*illa*) is temporally originated (*haadith*) while the Power (*qudra*, related to *qadir* etymologically) and the Will (*iraada*) of God is Eternal (*qadim*). Consequently, where there is the Origin (*asl*) and the Eternal (*qadim*) that is to say the Power (*qudra*) and the Will (*iraada*) of God, there is no temporality (*huduth*) or secondary causes. These determinations (*ta’ayyunaat*) or the secondary causes can be likened to the images while the Real (*haq*) is their Object or Person (*shaksh*)¹¹. If you try to catch hold of the image without its object you will loose both of them but if you take hold of the latter somehow, the former will inevitably come to your grip. Even if a natural cause may produce peace and happiness yet the temporality of this cause necessitates the temporality of its effects too, thus leaving us with the things subject to decay and annihilation (*fana*) in the end. Therefore, you should not let yourself fall pray to the secondary causes by any means rather you must always try to be attentive to the One and Only Cause without allowing your heart loose concentration on It.

⁹ The Sufis discourage the exclusive involvement with the secondary causes but do not deny them absolutely as do the Asharites but simply assert the primacy of the supra-cosmic First Cause over them in keeping with the definition of wisdom (*hikma*): putting each thing in its proper place’. Shah Wahhaj al-Din himself says a little further: “the secondary causes... can be taken into account provided that one never fails to see the divine Name *Qadir* and the Non-Cause as their original Source (*asl*).”

¹⁰ “God is powerful over each thing.” Koran, 2:20.

¹¹ “Light is the First Cause and every secondary cause is its shadow”. teaches Rumi.