

ARISTOTLE'S FOUR CAUSES AND DEPENDENT ORIGINATION OF THE BUDDHA

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ABSTRACT. *Questions that we often wonder, what are the causes of all these? Why things are the way they are? Do things happen by chance or not? How far can we control ourselves and those around us? Are we determined or not? What is the affect of our action? It is challenging to investigate upon ideas of two great thinkers, one from the West and one from the East, and the time span was not too far different from one another. Both the Buddha and Aristotle are interested upon metaphysics and changes around us, both tried to investigate why things are the way they are. Aristotle invented the Four Causes to explain the changes. And Dependent Origination of the Buddha explained the past, present and the future of all things. This paper tries to understand the two concepts, and see the similarities and differences between the two. And finally these concepts can apply to our life and out look towards society and natural world. It has great impact upon our thoughts and our life, and finally our actions.*

KEYWORDS: *Four causes of Aristotle (Material, Former, Efficient, and Final cause), Dependent Origination of the Buddha, the causal links, the principle of pratiyasamutpada, First cause, nature, changes of all things, one's action, and compassion*

1. Four Causes of Aristotle

Aristotle's Four Causes try to answer the question "why" things are the way they are. He wrote, "we do not have knowledge of a thing until we have grasped it is why, that is to say, its cause."² Aristotle believed that the four causes able to apply to all cases upon this changing world.

The four kinds of cause³ are first, the **material cause**: aspect of the change or movement which is determined by the material which the moving or changing things are made of, such as a knife is a made of iron, a shirt is made of cotton. Second, **formal cause** is a change or movement caused by the arrangement, shape or appearance of the thing changing or moving or a term describing the pattern or form which makes matter into a particular type of things which we recognize as being of that particular type, such as form of a tree, home, table etc. Third, **efficient or moving cause** is that which causes change and motion to start or stop or simply what

¹ Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand.

² Aristotle. *Physics* 194 b 17–20.

³ Aristotle. *Metaphysics* "Book 5, section 1013a"; Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vols. 17, 18.

brings thing about, such as a statue, the person chiseling away that transforms a block of marble into a statue, or a carpenter transforms wood into a table. Last, **final cause** or *telos* is the aim, goal or purpose of something, for the sake of which a thing is what it is, such as a seed becomes plant as a final cause. It is also very interesting to be noted that Aristotle also thought that a *telos* can be present without any form of deliberation, consciousness or intelligence. In the following passage, *Physics* II.8:

this is most obvious in the animals other than man: they make things neither by art nor after inquiry or deliberation. That is why people wonder whether it is by intelligence or by some other faculty that these creatures work, – spiders, ants and the like...It is absurd to suppose that purpose is not present because we do not observe the agent deliberating. Art does not deliberate. If the ship-building art were in the wood, it would produce the same results by nature. If, therefore, purpose is present in art, it is present also in nature.¹

According to Aristotle, art in nature such as a seed eventually becomes a plant as its final cause, under normal circumstances. He also stressed that the final cause is the cause that brings things about. Once a final cause is in place, the material, efficient, and formal causes follow by necessity. This notion of Aristotle towards nature and art are sufficient within the final cause. This is a very interesting point in comparing to the Buddha.

Aristotle also introduced the unmoved mover or prime mover as a primary cause of the mover of all the motion in the universe. In Book 12, of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle describe the unmoved mover as being perfectly beautiful, invisible and contemplation only the perfect contemplation. He also equates this concept with Active Intellect. In Book 8 of the *Physics* and Book 12 of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle said, “that there must be an immortal, unchanging being, responsible for all wholeness and orderliness in the sensible world.” In his “first philosophy” or *Metaphysics*, he stated the theology of the prime mover, as an independent divine eternal unchanged immaterial substance. In his cosmological argument, at least one eternal unmoved mover must exist to support everyday change:

of things that exists, substances are the first. But if substances can, then all things can perish... and yet, time and change cannot. Now, the only continuous change is that of place, and the only continuous change of place is circular motion. Therefore, there must be an eternal circular motion and this confirmed by the fixed stars which are moved by the eternal actual substance that’s purely actual.²

¹ *The Complete Works of Aristotle. Vol. I.* The Revised Oxford Translation, Ed. Jonathan Barnes.

² Ross, D., Ackrill, J. L. (2004) *Aristotle*, p.186.

Aristotle stressed an explanation without the temporal actuality and potentiality of an infinite locomotive chain is required eternal cosmos. That there is neither beginning or ending: from an unmoved eternal substance for whom the Prime Mobile, turns day and night, the seasons of the year, the transformation of the elements and the nature of plants and animal.

Istvan Bodnar (the author of “*Aristotle’s Natural Philosophy*” in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) wrote that Aristotle believed in infinite causal chains: behind every single individual of an animal species there is an infinite series of male ancestor, each causally responsible for the subsequent members in the series, because Aristotelian species are eternal and male parents are the efficient causes of their offspring. Aristotle will be entitled to assert that the cause of the human being is in the first instance his or her father, but is at the same time the Sun as it moves along its annual ecliptic path. Between celestial revolutions and the individual natural processes there is always a finite causal chain, as these natural processes could not possibly have continued without the celestial motions. This shows Aristotle sees the interconnected of all things, with the casual chain shows that all is connected.

2. Conclusion of Aristotle’s Four Causes

Aristotle recognized that everything in the world is in a state of flux, like his predecessor Heraclitus. He argued that behind every movement there must a chain of events that brought about the movement that we see taking place. And this chain of events must lead back to something which moves but is itself unmoved. This is referred as the Prime Mover. The Prime Mover had to be immaterial, not made of stuff, the activity is purely spiritual and intellectual. This concept of the Unmoved Mover or Prime Mover depends upon the argument that everything must have a cause. If we change the word Prime Mover into Nature, this can explainable in itself. As Aristotle does not adequately explain how Prime Mover or God as a thinking force could be responsible for causing movement. More over his idea of changes, there is no beginning nor ending, somehow contradicted to the Prime mover, when and where it all begun? But all is connected.

3. Dependent Origination of the Buddha

The general our universal definition of ‘dependent origination’ or ‘dependent arising’ is that everything arises in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions. Nothing exists by itself as a singular, independent entity. Christina Feldman has good explanation in the following: “What the *panicca-samuppada* or dependent origination actually describes is a vision of life or an understanding in which we see the way everything is interconnected- that there is nothing separate, nothing stands alone. Everything affects everything else. We are part of this system. We are part of this process of dependent origination – causal relationships affected by everything

that happens around us and, in turn affecting the kind of world that we all in inwardly and outwardly”.¹

The key expression of the principle of *pratiyasamutpada* is found in many sutras:

This is, because that is.

This is not, because that is not.

This ceases to be, because that ceases to be.

This means the secret of the universe is the nature of changes with causality, one thing leads to another. And the result or outcome is the result of multiple causes and conditions. As Rupert Gethin explains “the Theravada tradition records...as a fundamental axiom the principle that a single cause does not give rise to either a single result or several results; nor do several causes give rise to just one result; but rather several causes give rise to several results.”²

There are series of causal links (the Twelve *Nidanas*) that explain the process of rebirth and the arising of suffering (*dukkha*), as well as the possibility to revert this process, and liberate oneself from *samsara* (the rebirth). The twelve link of the causal relationship is the following:

With Ignorance as condition, Mental Formations arise
 With Mental Formations as condition, Consciousness arises
 With Consciousness as condition, Mind and Matter arise
 With Mind and Matter as condition, Sense Gates arise
 With Sense Gates as condition, Contact arises
 With Contact as condition, Feeling arises
 With Feeling as condition, Craving arises
 With Craving as condition, Clinging arises
 With Clinging as condition, Becoming arises
 With Becoming as condition, Birth arises
 With Birth as condition, Aging and Dying arise.

Bhikkhu Bodhi stated that the relationship between links is not considered to be a linear causal process, in which each link gives rise to the next link. That each link in the process arises in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions.³ He further stressed, when there is ignorance, craving and clinging invariably follow, and craving and clinging themselves indicate ignorance.⁴

Venerable Payutto commented that the Principle of Dependent Origination shows the interdependent and interrelation of all things in the form of a continuum. In his words:

¹ Feldman, Christina. “Dependent Origination,”

<http://www.dharma.org/archives/1999a/Christina.htm> 25 February 2011.

² Gethin, Rupert, *Foundation of Buddhism*, Oxford University Press, 1998. p.153

³ Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Words*, Wisdom Publications, (2005) p.316.

⁴ Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Word*, Wisdom Publications (2005) p.314.

That all things are interrelated and interdependent; all things exist in relation to each other; all things exist dependent or determinants; all things have no enduring existence, not even for a moment; all things have no intrinsic entity; all things are without First Cause.¹

Venerable Payutto stated that the Buddha's objective in teaching Dependent Origination is to address the problems of life on a practical basis. First, is the flow of causes and effects are bound to the conditions found in the natural process. There is no Creator or Appointer nor is the world a series of aimless accidents the objective is effectuated through self-reliant effort based on an understanding of causes and conditions. Second, is to create the right causes of desired results can only be done when there is an understanding of those causes and the way they connected with their respective results. Which necessitated the presence of an understanding (*panna*), that life must be dealt with and related to wisdom. Third, is the understanding of the natural process as subject to the cause and effect continuum can be effective of reducing the delusion which causes clinging to, and identification with things as self. Such perspective enables one to have more independent relationship with things as they are.²

Venerable Payutto expressed the essential meaning of Dependent Origination as a description of the process of arising and cessation of suffering. He stated that the word 'suffering' or '*dukkha*' is very important term in Buddhism. That it is essential to understand the word suffering. First, the suffering which is a feeling; this includes both mental and physical suffering, such as aches, pains, sadness, etc. Second, the suffering which is inherent in change; the suffering concealed within the inconstancy of happiness, this is the suffering which is caused by the changes within, and the cessation of, happiness, for example, the condition of comfortable and uncomfortable condition that one can gain within one's surrounding.

And lastly, the most important kind of suffering is the suffering that is inherent within all *sankhara*, all things which arise from determinates; the five *khandhas*. This refers to the subjection of all conditioned things to the contrary forces of birth and dissolution, how they are not perfect within themselves, but existed only as part of the cause and effect continuum. As such, they are likely to cause suffering (that is, the feeling of suffering, or *dukkha-dukkhata*) whenever there is inflexible craving and clinging to them through ignorance.³

The principle of Dependent Origination shows the interdependence and interrelation of all things in the form of a continuum in the different perspectives. The form of a continuum arises because of the various determinants are interrelated. The continuum moves and changes form because the various factors concerned cannot

¹ Payutto, P.A., *Dependent Origination, The Buddhist Law of Conditionality*, Translated by Bruce Evans (section 2, Interpreting Dependent Origination) www.buddhanet.net/cmdsg/coarise2.htm

² Ibid., section 2

³ Ibid., part 2.

endure, even for a moment. Things cannot endure, because they have no intrinsic entity, they are entirely dependent on determinants.

4. Comparisons of Four Causes of Aristotle and Dependent Origination of the Buddha

A. The changeable of all things: they both agree upon changes, which are happening at all times. Even though Aristotle's word for 'cause' is the Greek *aition* which means an explanation 'for how a thing came about' or responsible for what they are. Dependent Origination means all things change and are interrelated and interdependent upon multiple causes and conditions. **All things are connected. One cannot separate oneself from the rest.**

B. There are causes upon all changes: Aristotle uses Four Causes to explain all changes. The Dependent Origination explains that all things are interdependence upon multiple causes and conditions. That all is interdependent to one another (within the twelve links of dependent origination in Buddhism) that mentioned. For Aristotle, the causes are related from the first cause to final cause, (but not in the linear line, as causes of all things involve many factors as well, such as the seeds of will grow only with right temperature and fertile soils.) For Dependent Origination the causes are connected to all the results; and the results become the next cause interwoven deeply within. Several causes give rise to several results and unlimited of time and space especially in the concept of reincarnation in Buddhism. Very difficult to find out what causes the results, when and where. The results are not directed in one linear line as well. **Both Aristotle and the Buddha gave us the sense of awareness in all our actions that what we do there will be result afterwards.**

C. All things are connected. One cannot separate oneself from the rest of the society, or that one cannot deny one's action that will not affect the whole, as we are affected upon one another. This perspective means we have to help one another since we are part of the whole. Those who understand this concept will change their perspectives in politics, economics and how to treat each other in the society. **Compassion and helping hands are the answers for us survive in this 21 Century.**

D. Four causes of Aristotle and one's action in Buddhism.

Efficient cause: means one who act and responsible for his own action or *karma* in Buddhism. One designs one's path or one's life, as Aristotle said, the man who plans is a cause, and that which produces is the cause of that which is produced. **One is fully responsible for one's own action.**

Final cause: purpose, end, aim or goal of something. In Buddhism, enlightenment is the aim of practicing meditation. For Aristotle once the final cause is in place, the material, efficient and formal causes follow by necessity.¹ In Buddhism, if one is aiming at enlightenment, one has to prepare oneself both physical (Material cause) and mental (Formal cause: Guru, teacher to give ways and direction).

¹ Aristotle, *Physics* II.9.

E. Unmoved mover – First cause: Nature in Buddhism

In Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, the unmoved mover, First cause, as being perfect, beautiful, and itself contemplating of Active Intellect and is nature that is understood in Buddhism. Aristotle means eternal cosmos that turns day and nights, seasons of the year, transformation of the elements and nature of plants and animal. In Buddhism there is nothing which exists beyond or separate from nature. All events in nature proceed at the direction of the interrelationship of natural phenomena. There are no accidents nor is there any creative force independent of causes. Human beings are part of nature not separate from it. Both understand of nature in Buddhism and First cause or Unmoved Mover of Aristotle are about the same, as it is the understanding of the natural process as subject to the cause and effect. Unmoved mover by Aristotle is to explain a primary cause or mover of all the motion in the universe.

Conclusion

To answer the question, what are the causes of all these? Why things are the way they are? Do things happen by chance or not? We can see after all the investigations upon the topics, nature itself is the answer. It is eternal cosmos that happened to make things are the way they are. All things do not happen by chance but there are causes for it. Only one has to find out or investigate the causes that make it so. Four Causes of Aristotle able to explain or direct in understanding, Dependent Origination in Buddhism tries to explain in perspective that involve time and space that is beyond understanding as it is also due to the problem of reincarnation. Only have to understand beyond time and space. In twelve causal links in Buddhism explain process of rebirth, arising of suffering, and finally able to liberate oneself from *samsara*. This is another topic to discuss about.

Wisdom that we can gain from this investigation is that no matter what we do, will always affect upon the whole. It also tells us to have compassion towards one another, which is the way to survive in this century. We are in the middle of suffering time all around the world, what we need is sharing and giving to others, as whatever we do always affect upon oneself and the whole. This understanding will change the whole perspective of man. With concept in mind, one learns to give more, than to gain. The humanity can overcome the problem of poverty; as those who have are able to provide or share more to those who have not, which is opposite to the present society, (that those who have always wanting more), the riches get richer. In the problem of ecology, people will help one another to protect the environment as this problem cannot be solved only by one, but the whole humanities. Finally, people will care for one another with helping hands to solve all kinds of suffering in our society, as every action will affect us all.

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