Causes and effects

Linguistics, English

Causes and Effects. The two related concepts of " cause" and " effect" are so common in the modern world that most people take them for granted and hardly think about them at all. They are so widely accepted and understood that it is hard to imagine a time when people did not think in these terms. Their meaning and importance can best be described in terms of the history of religion and science and the emergence of a modern, materialistic world view.

In the ancient world, the prevailing world view was polytheistic, consisting of a group of supernatural gods and goddesses, or sometimes also spirits and ancestral beings, who became involved in the material world of human beings in ways that were fickle and unpredictable. People attributed things that happened to these unseen beings, or to evil magic, and tried to influence events by making offerings and sacrifices, thinking that this would change the future (Iles-Jones, 2004, p. 454). There was little understanding of natural events like thunder, or volcanoes, or disease processes and so these things took on personal attributes. This vague linkage between natural and supernatural events means that we cannot speak of a true understanding of cause and effect in the ancient world.

With the rise of monotheism, a single God was perceived to be the first cause of all that exists, and everything that is seen in the world began to be interpreted in terms of this initial cause, in tension with the lesser causes of human actions. Anything which was not immediately understood could be seen as an act of God. This all changed, however, in the period known as the Enlightenment in European history. For the first time theoretical ideas began to be linked with practical applications. It was Francis Bacon (1561-1626), a

famous British lawyer and statesman, who first proposed a style of exploration which we now know as " the scientific method" (Gower, 1997, p. 45). He worked out that the best way to explain the world was to do controlled experiments and watch carefully what happened. By changing individual aspects of the experiment it was possible to work out what was causing different effects to happen. When the causes and effects were found to be consistent and repeatable, firm laws could be deduced, and events predicted, and this was an extremely significant advance for humankind. This line of thinking did not necessarily replace religious thinking, since a divine being could still be responsible for starting off these linked events, or for stepping in at any point, but it started off a new way of seeing the material world in terms of strict rules that cannot normally be broken.

In modern times the implications of this way of thinking are immense. An understanding of causes and effects underpins all of the major professions, for example in medicine doctors analyze symptoms to find out what process has caused them. They also prescribe treatments because they know that certain chemicals or procedures bring about positive physical effects on the body. Lawyers seek the causes of crime and teachers provide classes which bring about the effect that children learn. Historians, economists and politicians are able to work out short, medium and long term consequences of policies by examining similar cases in the past.

Causes and effects have therefore become a fundamental part of the way people think and behave. The more thoroughly a person understands the causes of certain events, the more chance he or she has of being able to influence them in the future. Without a strong belief in causes and effects,

society would descend into chaos and people would suffer greatly from the

uncertainty that would then emerge.

References

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