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Lesson 14: Acquired Knowledge

The Necessity for the Survey of Acquired Knowledge

We saw that knowledge by presence is the finding of reality itself, and that therefore there is no way to have doubt or scruple about it. But we know that the range of presentational knowledge is limited and by itself it cannot provide a solution to the problems of epistemology.

If there were no way to ascertain facts by means of acquired knowledge, we would not logically be able to accept definite theories in any science, and even self-evident first principles would lose their definiteness and necessity, and only the name of self-evidence and necessity would remain with them.

Therefore, it is necessary that we continue our endeavor to evaluate acquired knowledge and to obtain a criterion of truth for it. For the sake of this we shall survey the various kinds of acquired knowledge.

Idea and Affirmation

Logicians divide knowledge into two parts: idea (tasawwur) and affirmation (tasdiq). In fact, they have limited the common concept of knowledge to acquired knowledge, and on the other hand, they have extended it to include simple ideas.

The literal meaning of tasawwur is 'to form an image' and 'to acquire a form,' and in the terminology of the logicians it means a simple mental appearance which has the property of disclosing something beyond itself, such as the idea of Mount Damavand and the concept of mountain.

The literal meaning of tasdiq is 'to consider true' and 'to acknowledge,' and in the terminology of logicians and philosophers it is used with two similar meanings, and in this respect it is considered to be ambiguous:

- i. a logical proposition which in simple form includes the subject, predicate, and judgment of unity;

ii. The judgment itself which is a simple matter and shows one's belief in the unity of the subject and predicate.

Some modern Western logicians imagine that affirmation (tasdiq) means the transference of the mind from one idea to another on the basis of the rules of the association of ideas. But this conception is incorrect, for neither is affirmation necessary everywhere there is an association of ideas, nor is an association of ideas required everywhere there is affirmation.

Rather, affirmation rests on judgment, and this is the very difference between a proposition and several ideas accompanying each other and following one upon the other in the mind, pictured without any relation between them.

Elements of the Proposition

We know that 'affirmation' in the sense of judgment is something simple, but in the sense of proposition it is composed of several elements. Several different views have been expressed about the elements of the proposition.

Since it would require a lengthy discussion to survey all of them, and such a survey properly belongs to the subject of logic, we shall merely have a glance at them here. Some say that each predicative proposition (qadhiyyah hamliyyah) is composed of two elements: subject and predicate.

Others add the relation between these two as a third element. Yet others consider the judgment of the occurrence of the relationship or the lack of occurrence of the relationship to be a fourth element of the proposition.

Some distinguish between affirmative and negative propositions and say that with regard to negative propositions a judgment does not exist, but rather they consider it to be a case of the negation of judgment.

Others deny the existence of the relation in simple existential propositions (halliyyah basitah), i.e. propositions which assert the existence of the subject in the external world, and in primary predications, i.e. propositions in which the conceptual content of the subject and the predicate are the same, such as 'Man is a rational animal.' However, undoubtedly, in logic no proposition can be without either a relationship or judgment, for, as we said, affirmation rests on judgment, and judgment is with respect to two elements of the proposition.

However, it is possible that one may have to recognize a difference among propositions from a philosophical and ontological point of view.

Divisions of Ideas

From one perspective, ideas can be divided into two types: universal and particular. A 'universal idea' is a concept which can represent numerous things or persons, such as the concept of man which applies to millions of individuals. A 'particular idea' is a mental form which only represents one existent, such as the mental form of Socrates.

Each of the ideas, whether universal or particular, may be further divided by other divisions about which we shall provide a brief explanation.

Sensory Ideas: These are simple phenomena in the soul which result from the effects of the relations between the sensory organs and material realities, such as images of scenery which we see with the eyes, or sounds which we hear with the ears. The subsistence of this kind of idea depends on the subsistence of relations with the external world, and after being cut off from contact with the external world they vanish in a short period of time (such as one tenth of a second).

Imaginary Ideas: These are simple specific phenomena in the soul which are subsequent results of sensory ideas and links with the external world. But their subsistence does not depend upon links with the external world, such as the mental image of a view of a garden which remains in the mind even after the eyes are closed, and may be recalled even after years have gone by.

Ideas of Prehension (Wahm):¹ Many philosophers have mentioned another kind of particular idea which is related to particular meanings, and which is exemplified by the feeling of enmity which some animals have for some others, a feeling which requires them to flee. Some philosophers have extended this term to cover particular meanings in general, including the feelings of affection and enmity of man.

Undoubtedly, universal concepts of affection and enmity are a kind of universal ideas. They cannot be counted as types of particular ideas.

The perception of particular affections and enmities in the perceiver himself that is the affection which a person finds in himself for another, or the enmity which he feels in himself for another, is really a kind of presentational knowledge of qualities of the soul, and we cannot count them as kinds of acquired knowledge.

Our feeling of another person's enmity, in fact, is not a direct feeling without intermediary, but it is a comparison between a state which a man has found within himself and attributed to another person in a similar condition. But judgments about the perceptions of animals require another discussion which we do not have the opportunity to pursue further here.

What can be accepted as a kind of specific idea is an idea which results from states of the soul, and is apt to be recalled, and which are like imaginary ideas with relation to sensory ideas, such as remembering a specific fear that appeared at a certain moment, or a specific affection which existed at a

specific moment. It is necessary to mention that sometimes ideas of wahm are spoken of as ideas that do not correspond to any reality and are sometimes referred to as 'fantasy'.

Universal Ideas

We saw that in one respect ideas may be divided into two parts, universal and particular. The types of ideas which we have discussed until now have all been particular ideas. Universal ideas, which are called 'concepts of the intellect' or 'intelligibles' are the focus of important philosophical debates, and since long ago have been the subject of discussion.

From ancient times there have existed views according to which basically there are no universal concepts. The terms which are used to denote universal concepts are in reality like equivocal terms which denote various things.

For example, the term 'man' who is used to designate many individuals is like some proper name used by several families to name their children, or like a family name which applies to all the members of a family.

Proponents of this theory are known as 'nominalists.' At the end of the Middle Ages, William of Ockham inclined toward this theory, and it was later accepted by Berkeley. In modern times, positivists and some other schools must also be considered to hold this kind of position.² The other theory which is similar to that which has been mentioned is that universal concepts are vague particular concepts, such that some features of particular and specific forms are omitted so that they may conform to other things or persons.

For example, our idea of a specific person could be adapted to his brother by deleting some of its features. By deleting more features it could be applied to even more people, and by continuing in this way the idea becomes more general and applies to more and more people until at last it may even be applied to animals, or even plants and minerals, such as a phantom seen from afar, which because of its vagueness may conform to the idea of a stone, tree, animal or a man.

This is why at first glance we doubt whether it is human or something else. The closer we get and the clearer we see it, the more restricted are the limits of probability, until finally, we determine a specific person or thing.

Hume had this sort of belief about universal concepts, and many others also have thought this way about universals. On the other hand, some ancient philosophers, such as Plato, insisted on the reality of universal concepts, and even considered them to have a kind of reality of their own outside the bounds of space and time.

The knowledge of universals is likened to a kind of observation of non-material entities and intellectual archetypes (Platonic Ideas). This theory has been interpreted in various ways and many theories have branched off from it.³ Thus some have held that the human spirit prior to acquiring a body had seen

intellectual truths in the world of immaterial entities, and after acquiring a body it forgot them, and by seeing material individuals, the spirit becomes reminded of these immaterial truths and the perception of universals is this remembering.

Others, who do not subscribe to the spirit's existence prior to its attachment with the body, understand sensory perception as a means to prepare the self to observe immaterial entities.

This observation which is obtained by this capacity is observation from afar, and the perception of universals is this same observation of non-material realities from afar, in contrast to gnostic disclosures, which are obtained by a different kind of preparation and are observed from up close.

Some Islamic philosophers, like Mulla Sadr and the late 'Allamah Tabataba'i, accepted this interpretation.

The most famous theory of universal concepts is that they are a special kind of mental concept realized with the attribute of universality in a special stage (martabah) of the mind. Hence, in one of its definitions the intellect is termed as the faculty for the apprehension of universal mental concepts. This theory is ascribed to Aristotle and has been accepted by most Islamic philosophers.

Noting that the first and second theory in fact imply the denial of intellectual perception, which is a rallying point for the destruction of metaphysics and its depreciation to philological discussion and linguistic analysis, it is necessary to delve further on this issue in order to find a firm foundation for our future discussions.

A Study of Universal Concepts

As has been pointed out, the nominalists held that general terms involve a kind of equivocation or something similar so that they may refer to numerous individuals. For this reason, in order to provide a decisive answer to them it is necessary to explain ambiguity, wherein a common expression is used for different things (*mushtarak lafzi*), and common meanings (*mushtarak ma'nawi*).

Ambiguity (*mushtarak lafzi*) occurs when a word is given several designations or is used to designate different meanings through multiple conventions,⁴ as 'spring' is used for a coil, a season, a fountain, and a leap. However, common meaning (*mushtarak ma'nawi*) occurs when an expression by a single convention designates a common aspect of numerous cases, and with a single meaning corresponds to all of them. The most important differences between ambiguity and common meaning are as follows:

1. Ambiguity requires numerous initial conventions, whereas common meaning requires no more than one initial convention.
2. Common meaning is true of a potentially infinite number of individuals or instances, whereas ambiguity is only true of a set number of meanings.

3. Common meaning is a single general meaning which is understood without a need for comparison, whereas ambiguity involves several meanings the determination of which requires determining indications [that fix the meaning].

Now, with regard to these distinctions, we shall resume our discussion of such expressions as 'man,' 'animal,' etc., to find whether each of these expressions can be understood as having a single meaning without need for a determining indication, or whether several meanings come to mind when one hears them and if there is no determining indication we remain puzzled about which of them the speaker meant.

Undoubtedly, we do not take Muhammad, 'Ali, Hasan and Husayn to be the meanings of the word 'man'; therefore, when we hear this expression we are not in doubt about the sense of this expression, asking which of these meanings it has. Rather we know that this expression has a single meaning which is common among these individuals and other men. Hence, it is not ambiguous.

Now let us see if this kind of expression has limited instances or whether it is true of an infinite number of individuals. It is obvious that the meaning of this expression does not accept any sort of limit on the number of its instances, but may be truly applied to infinite individuals.

Finally, we see that none of these expressions has an infinite number of designating conventions. No one is able to imagine in his mind an infinite number of individuals, while specifying an infinite number of designating conventions for a single expression. On the other hand, we see that we ourselves can designate a single expression in such a way that it conforms to an infinite number of individuals. Hence, universals do not require an infinite number of designating conventions.

Consequently, universal terms are a kind of those which have common meaning, not of those which are ambiguous.

One may object that this explanation is not sufficient to explain the impossibility of numerous designating conventions, for it is possible that the one who designates may imagine one instance (and not an infinity of instances) in his mind, and designate an expression for all similar individuals.

We know that this person must imagine the meanings of 'all' and 'individual' and 'similar' in order to make such a convention. Hence the question returns to how these expressions are designated. How can they be applied to an infinite number of cases?

We have no choice but to posit that the mind has the ability to conceive concepts which apply to an unlimited number of cases. Hence it is not possible for such concepts to be designated one at a time for an infinite number of instances, for this is not feasible for any human.

A Response to a Doubt

Nominalists, in order to deny the reality of universal concepts, have raised the following doubt: every concept which occurs in a mind is a particular and specific concept which differs from concepts of the same kind which occur in other minds. Even if a person conceives the same concept at another time, it will be another concept.

So, how can it be said that universal concepts occur in the mind with the attributes of universality and unity? This doubt originates from confusion between the respect of conception and the respect of existence, in other words, confusion between the principles of logic and the principles of philosophy. We have no doubt that each concept, in so far as it exists, is particular, in philosophical language, “existence is equivalent to particularity.”

When it is imagined again, it will have another existence, but its conceptual universality and singularity are not due to its existence but owing to its conceptual respect, that is, the same representative aspect in relation to various people and instances.

In other words, when our minds look at a concept from the point of view of its instrumental, mirroring capacity (and not independently) and examine its capacity for correspondence in various instances, the property of universality is abstracted from it. To the contrary, when its existence is considered in the mind, it is a case of particularity.

A Survey of Other Views

Those who imagine that a universal concept is a particular vague idea, and that general terms designate these same vague and pale forms [as though the particularity had been bleached out of them], will not be able to find the truth about universals. The best way to make clear their error is to draw attention to

concepts which either do not have any real instances in the external world at all, such as ‘non-existent’ or ‘impossible,’ or which do not have material or sensible instances, such as the concepts of God, angel, and the spirit, or which are conformable to both material and non-material instances, such as the concepts of cause and effect.

For with regard to these concepts it cannot be said that these are particular pale forms. Also, concerning concepts which are true of opposite things, such as the concept of color, which applies both to black and to white, it cannot be said that the color white has become so vague that it takes the absolute form of color and so is also true of black, or that the color black has become so weak and pale that it may also be truly applied to white.^{[5](#)}

Platonists also have such difficulties, for most universal concepts, such as the concept of the non-existent and the impossible; do not have intelligible archetypes, so they cannot hold that the perception

of universals is the observation of such intellectual and non-material truths.

Therefore, the correct position is that held by most of the Islamic philosophers and the rationalists, that man possesses a special cognitive faculty called the intellect, whose function is intellection of universal mental concepts, whether they have sensible instances or not.

- [1.](#) See Parviz Morewedge, *The Metaphysica of Avicenna (ibn Sina)* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 321f.
- [2.](#) In fact, while nominalism has attracted some positivists and their students, the official position of such logical positivists as Rudolf Carnap was that the entire debate about the existence of universals is meaningless. This claim was subsequently shown to be based on an inadequate theory of meaning. (Tr.)
- [3.](#) The phenomenology of Edmund Husserl should be considered as being derived from this theory.
- [4.](#) 'Convention' is used here in much the same way that Kripke uses 'initial baptism' for the social agreement by which a word is applied to a given kind of object. (Tr.)
- [5.](#) The idea seems to be that particular vague ideas should group together things that are similar within the limits of the vagueness, as the concept of grey may be vague enough to allow for various shades. But concepts which apply to opposites do not function in this way, for black and white are not shades of color analogous to the shades of grey. Black and white are opposites, and not similar within some vague limits. (Tr.)

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