

Lesson 15: Types of Universal Concepts

Types of Intelligibles

Universal concepts which are employed in the intellectual sciences¹ are divided into three groups: (1) whatish concepts or first intelligibles such as the concept of man and the concept of whiteness; (2) philosophical concepts or secondary philosophical intelligibles, such as the concept of cause and the concept of effect; and (3) logical concepts or secondary logical intelligibles, such as conversion ('aks mustawi) and contraposition ('aks naqidh).

We should remember that there are other types of universal concepts which are used in ethics and law, and later we shall refer to them.

This tripartite division which was originated by Islamic philosophers has many uses with which we shall become familiar in future discussions. Lack of precision in recognizing and distinguishing them from one another causes' confusion and many difficulties in philosophical discussions. Most of the lapses of Western philosophers are due to confusing these concepts, examples of which can be found in the words of Hegel and Kant. Therefore it is necessary to provide some explanations about them.

Universal concepts are either predicable of entified ('ayni) things, in which case, in technical terms, it is said that they have external characterization (ittisaf khariji), as the concept of man which is predicated of Hasan, Husayn, and so on, and it is said, "Hasan is a man," or, they are not predicable of entified things but only to concepts and mental forms, in which case they are technically said to have mental characterization (ittisaf dhini), such as the concepts universal and particular (in logical terms), the first of which is an attribute of 'the concept man' and the second of which is an attribute of 'the mental form of Hasan'.

The [concepts of the] second group which are applied only to mental things are called 'logical concepts' or 'secondary logical intelligibles'.

Concepts which are predicated of external things are divided into two groups: one group is of those

concepts which the mind acquires automatically from specific cases, that is to say, when one or several individual perceptions are obtained by means of the external senses or internal intuitions, immediately the intellect acquires a universal concept of them, such as the universal concept of 'whiteness', which is acquired after seeing one or several white things, or the universal concept of 'fear', which is acquired after the appearance of specific feelings once or several times. Such concepts are called whatish concepts or first intelligibles.

There is another group of concepts whose abstraction requires mental effort and comparison of things with one another, such as the concepts of cause and effect, which is abstracted by attending to the relevant relation after comparing two things such that the existence of one depends on the other.

For example, when we compare fire with the heat which comes from it, we notice the dependence of the heat on the fire. The intellect abstracts the concept of cause from the fire and the concept of effect from the heat. If there were no attention and comparison, these kinds of concepts would never be obtained.

If fire were seen thousands of times, and in the same way if heat were felt thousands of times, but no comparison were made between them, but the appearance of one from the other were not noticed, the concepts of cause and effect would never be obtained. These kinds of concepts are called 'philosophical concepts' or 'secondary philosophical intelligibles,' and in technical terms it is said:

The occurrence ('arudh) and characterization (ittisaf) of first intelligibles are both external.[2](#)

The occurrence ('arudh) is mental but the characterization (ittisaf) is external for secondary philosophical intelligibles. The occurrence ('arudh) and characterization (ittisaf) of secondary logical intelligibles are both mental.

The definitions and applications of the expressions 'mental occurrence' and 'external occurrence' and likewise the designations 'philosophical concepts' and 'secondary intelligibles' are controversial. We consider these only as technical terms and justify them as was mentioned.

Characteristics of Each of the Types of Intelligibles

a. The characteristic of logical concepts is that they apply only to mental concepts and forms, and consequently they are completely recognized with a little attention. All the basic concepts of logic are of this group.

b. The characteristic of whatish concepts is that they describe the whatnesses of things and specify the limits of their existence and are like empty frameworks for existents, and therefore they may be defined as conceptual frameworks. These concepts are employed in various true sciences.

c. The characteristic of philosophical concepts is that they are not obtained without comparison and intellectual analysis. When they are applied to existents they describe types of existents (not their

whatish limits), such as the concept of cause, which corresponds to fire but never specifies its specific essence, but describes the kind of relation it has with fire, which is the relation of having an effect, a relation which also exists among other things.

Sometimes this characteristic is interpreted in such a way that philosophical concepts have no entified referents, or their occurrence is mental, although this interpretation is controversial and requires justification and explication. All pure philosophical concepts are of this group.

d. Another characteristic of philosophical concepts is that there are no particular concepts or ideas for them. For example, it is not the case that in our minds there is a particular form of causality and a universal concept, and likewise for the concept of effect, and other philosophical concepts.

On the other hand, every universal concept for which there is a sensory, imaginary, or prehensive (wahmi) idea, such that the difference between them is only in universality and particularity, then it will be a whatish concept, not a philosophical concept. It is to be noted that the opposite of this characteristic does not generally hold of whatish concepts that is, it is not the case that for every whatish concept there is a sensory, imaginary or prehensive form.

For example, the concept 'soul' is a species concept and a whatish concept, there is no particular mental form of it, and its instance can only be intuited by presentational knowledge.

Respectival (I'tibari) Concepts

The term i'tibari (respectival), which frequently encountered in philosophical discussions, is employed with various meanings and is really equivocal. One must take care to distinguish among its meanings so as not to confuse them or make mistakes.

In one sense, all secondary intelligibles, whether logical or philosophical, are called i'tibari, and even the concept of existence is counted as i'tibari. This term is used extensively by Shaykh al-Ishraq, and in various books of his he uses 'intellectual i'tibari' with this meaning.

Another sense of i'tibari is specified for legal and ethical concepts, which in the language of recent scholars are called 'value concepts'. In a third sense, only concepts which have no external or mental instances and which are constructed with the help of the faculty of imagination are called i'tibari, such as the concept of a ghoul.

These concepts are also called 'fantastic'. I'tibari also has another sense to be contrasted with fundamentality (asalat) which is employed in discussions of the fundamentality of existence (asalat wujud) or fundamentality of whatness (asalat mahuwiyat), and which will be mentioned in its proper place.

Here it is appropriate to explain i'tibari in the sense of value, although detailed discussion of the subject

must be sought in the philosophy of ethics or the philosophy of law. We shall provide here only a brief explanation as is appropriate.

Ethical and Legal Concepts

Every ethical or legal topic which we consider consists of concepts such as ought and ought not, is required and is prohibited, and the like, which may be the predicates of propositions. Likewise other concepts, such as justice and injustice, trustworthiness and treachery can be the subjects of propositions.

When we consider these concepts we see that they are not whatish concepts, for they have no entified ('ayni) instances, hence they are called i'tibari. For example, the concepts of thief or usurper happen to be attributes of people, but not because they pertain to the quiddity of a person, but because the person has taken someone's property.

When we consider the concept of property, we see that even if it is applied to gold and silver, it is not because they are metals of a specific kind, but because they are desired by people and they can be a means for meeting their needs.

From another perspective, the acquisition of property by a person is the sign of another concept called 'possession' which also has no external instance, that is, to credit (i'tibar) someone with the title 'possessor' and to credit the gold with the title 'possession' does not change the essence of the person nor the essence of the gold. In conclusion, expressions of this kind have special features which must be discussed from several different perspectives.

One of these perspectives is linguistic and literary, that is, for what meaning was the term originally coined, and how has the meaning changed to have acquired its present form? Is the application of this meaning literal or figurative? Likewise one may discuss prescriptive and descriptive terms, and what the purport of prescription is, and whether ethical and legal terms refer to prescriptions or descriptions.

Discussions of this kind are related to branches of linguistics and literature, and scholars of the science of the principles of Islamic jurisprudence (usul al-fiqh) also have made a great many researches and investigations into these matters.

Another aspect of discussions about these concepts is related to the ways in which these concepts are perceived, and the mechanism of transference of the mind from one concept to another, which must be examined in the psychology of mind.

Finally, another aspect of discussions about these concepts is related to their relations with objective realities, and whether these concepts have been invented by the mind and have no relation to external realities.

For example, are 'ought' and 'ought not' and other value concepts completely independent of other kinds of concepts which are constructed by means of a special mental power, or are they are merely descriptive of individual or social desires and inclinations, or are these concepts related to objective realities or somehow abstracted from them?

Are ethical and legal propositions descriptive? Do they have truth values? Can they be correct or in error? Are they prescriptive so that correctness and incorrectness are meaningless for them? In the case that truth values are imagined of them, what would be the criteria for truth and falsehood? By what standards may their truth and error be recognized? This part of the discussion is related to epistemology, and this is the area in which it must be explained.

Here we shall provide a brief explanation of the simple concepts of ethics and law, and in the final portion of the discussion of epistemology we shall deal with the evaluation of value propositions, and at the same time we shall indicate the difference between ethical and legal propositions.

Ought and Ought Not

The words 'ought' and 'ought not' which are used for cases of commands and prohibitions, in some languages are expressed by a single particle (as in Arabic, in which the letter lam indicates the command form and the word la indicates prohibition).

In every language about which we have information, we may replace the command and prohibition forms, such as 'You ought to say it' replaces 'Say it', and 'You ought not to say it' replaces 'Do not say it'. However, sometimes they are used in the form of independent concepts with the meaning of 'obligation' and 'prohibition', as when we employ the descriptive sentence, 'It is obligatory for you to say it' instead of the prescriptive expression, 'Say it.'

These rhetorical devices exist in many languages, but they cannot be considered as the key to solving philosophical problems. One cannot define legal expressions as those which are prescriptive, for, as has been mentioned, in place of prescriptive statements one may use descriptive sentences.

The expression 'ought', whether expressed as a particle or as an independent noun, and also equivalent expressions such as 'obligatory' and 'necessary', which are sometimes used in propositions which by no means express values, such as when a teacher in a laboratory says to a student, "You ought to mix sodium with chlorine to make salt," or when a physician tells a patient, "You ought to take this medicine until you become well."

Undoubtedly, the purport of such expressions is nothing but the exhibition of the relation between the production of a chemical substance and the action and reaction, or cause and effect, during the combining of two elements, or between taking some medicine and recovering.

In philosophical terms the 'ought' in these cases expresses the deductive necessity between the reason

and its result or cause and effect, that is to say, if a specific event (cause) does not occur, its result (effect) will not occur.

When these expressions are used as legal or ethical terms, they gain an evaluative aspect. Here, various views are presented about them, one of which is that the purport of such terms is to express individual or social desires and their objects regarding an action. If it is expressed in the form of a descriptive sentence, it will have no other meaning than desirability.

The correct view is this that such terms do not directly indicate the object of desire but rather the value and the object of desire of an action is understood by a conditional indication. The main purport is the very expression of the relation of causality which exists between the action and the goal of ethics or law.

For example, when a lawyer says, 'The criminal must be punished,' even though the aim of this action is not mentioned, in reality he wants to present the relation between punishment and the goal or one of the goals of the law, that is, security for the society.

Likewise, when a moral trainer says, "A loan ought to be repaid to the creditor," he really wants to describe the relation between this action and the goal of morality, such as the ultimate perfection of man, or eternal felicity.

For the same reason, if we ask a lawyer, "Why ought criminals to be punished?", the answer would be, "Because if criminals were not punished, chaos and anarchy would be imposed on the society." Also, if we asked a moral trainer, "Why ought loans to be repaid to their creditors?", an answer will be given appropriate to the standards accepted in ethical philosophy.

Therefore, the kind of concept of ought and moral and legal obligation is also that of the secondary philosophical intelligibles. If it is possible for other meanings to be included, or if they may be used in another way, it will be in a kind of figure of speech.

Legal and Ethical Subjects

As was mentioned, another group of concepts are used in legal and ethical propositions which include the subjects of these propositions, such as justice and injustice, ownership and marriage. There are also discussions from the point of view of lexicography and etymology, about these concepts and the changes in literal and figurative meanings, which are related to literature and linguistics.

In brief, it can be said that most of them are borrowed from whatish and philosophical concepts and used with conventional meanings in accord with the practical needs of man in individual and social contexts. For example, for the sake of controlling desires and putting limits on behavior, in general, limits are assigned the violation of which is called injustice and despotism.

The opposite is called justice and fairness, as with respect to the necessity of limiting man's domination

over property acquired in a special way; contractual domination over some pieces of property are considered as ownership.

What is noteworthy from the epistemological point of view is whether these concepts are only based on the desires of groups or individuals and have no relation to objective truth independent of the inclinations of social groups and individuals.

Consequently, either these concepts are not susceptible to intellectual analysis, or one can search for a basis for them among objective truths and external realities, and they can be analyzed and explained on the basis of cause and effect.

In this context the correct view is this. These concepts, although they are conventional and respectful in a specific sense, they are not generally without relation to external reality and outside the realm of the law of cause and effect. Their validity is based on the recognized needs of man to attain felicity and his own perfection.

This recognition, as in other cases, sometimes is correct and corresponds with reality, and sometimes is in error and opposed to reality. Possibly, one may put forth legislation for his own personal interests, and may even impose it on a society by force.

However, even then, it cannot be considered as being done capriciously and without standard. It is for the same reason these things can be examined critically, and some conventions may be confirmed and some may be rejected. For each of them reasons and arguments can be given. If this legislation were merely an expression of personal inclinations, like a matter of individual taste in the choice of the color of one's clothing, it would never have been worthy of praise or blame. Approval and disapproval would otherwise have no meaning but agreement or disagreement in taste.

Consequently, the worth of these concepts, although dependent on convention and contract, is considered as a symbol of objectively true relations between man's actions and their results, relations which must be discovered in the behavior of man. In truth, these contractual and conventional concepts are grounded on existential relations and true welfare.

1. The intellectual sciences ('ulum 'aqli), derived from reason, are contrasted with the transmitted sciences ('ulum naqli), the revealed or literally, narrated sciences. (Tr.)

2. Mohaghegh and Izutsu translate 'aru' as 'occurrence' and ittisaf as 'qualification', in *The Metaphysics of Sabzavari* (Tehran: Iran University Press, 1983), p. 67. Both concepts pertain to the relation between the concept and the object to which it applies, but 'aru' refers to the application of the predicate concept to the object, a relational property of the predicate concept, while ittisaf refers to the qualification of the object by the concept. Any translation of these terms is bound to be artificial, but as a memory aid the ittisaf will be called the characterization and the 'aru' will be called the occurrence, indicating that the former pertains to the character of the object while the latter to the manner in which the predicate concept occurs to one who applies it to the object, in keeping with the author's explanation.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/philosophical-instructions-muhammad-taqi-misbah-yazdi/lesson-15-types-universal-concepts>