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Lesson 16: Empiricism

Positivism

In the previous lessons we briefly mentioned the kinds of ideas while at the same time introducing opposing opinions held concerning them. Here we explain more fully some of the famous noteworthy positions to be found in Western sources.

We know that most of the thinkers of the West basically deny the existence of universal ideas, and so naturally they do not accept the power, by means of which these ideas are perceived, called the 'intellect'. In the present age, positivists have not only developed the same taste, but also have gone beyond it.

They hold that true perception is limited to sense perception, to perception which is obtained as a result of contact with the sense organs by material phenomena, and which, following the cessation of the relation with the external world, remain in some weaker form.

They believe that man constructs verbal symbols for objects of perception which are similar to one another and that when he speaks or thinks, he brings to mind all cases of the same kind, or he repeats the same verbal symbols which were posited for those cases. And in reality, thinking is a kind of mental speaking.

Hence, those which philosophers call universal ideas or intelligible concepts, in their view, are nothing but those same mental words. Only when these words directly represent objects of sense perception, and their instances can be perceived by the sense organs, and can be shown to others, are they considered as meaningful and verifiable, otherwise they are considered words without meaning.

In truth, they only accept a portion of the whatish concepts, and these only as mental words whose meanings are their particular sensory instances. However, they do not accept the secondary intelligibles, especially metaphysical concepts, not even as meaningful mental words. On this basis, they consider metaphysical topics as unscientific and absolutely meaningless.

They limit experience to sensual experience, and do not pay attention to inner experiences which are acquired through knowledge by presence. At least they are considered unscientific because in their view, the word “scientific” is only applicable to cases which can be proven for others by the senses.

In this way, positivists consider discussion of instincts and motives and other psychological matters which are perceived by inner experience as unscientific. Only external behavior is held as the subject of psychology fit for scientific discussion. Consequently, they void psychology of its content.

According to this philosophy, which can be called “empiricism” or “extreme empiricism”, there is no place for scientific discussion and research which could result in certainty about metaphysical topics. They consider all philosophical topics to be nonsense and worthless. Perhaps philosophy has never faced such a hard headed enemy. Therefore, we had better discuss it more fully.

A Critique of Positivism

Positivism, which is truly one of the basest tendencies of human thought in all history, has numerous failures, the most important of which will be indicated below:

1. With this tendency, the most firm foundations of knowledge, that is, knowledge by presence and propositions evident by reason (‘aql), are lost. With this loss no intellectual explanation can be presented for the correctness of knowledge and its correspondence to reality.

Positivists have tried to define true knowledge in another way. Truth is held to be knowledge which is accepted by others, which can be proved by sensory experience. Obviously, the change in terminology does not solve the problem of the value of knowledge. The agreement and acceptance of those who do not attend to this difficulty cannot create any value and worth.

2. Positivists rely on sense perception, which is the most unstable and dubious basis for knowledge. Sensory knowledge, more than any other type of knowledge, is exposed to error.

Noting the point that sensory knowledge, in reality, occurs inside of man, they have closed off the way to logical proof of the external world. There is no way for them to answer the doubts of the Idealists.

3. The difficulties which we mentioned with regard to the nominalists also apply to the positivists.

4. To claim that metaphysical concepts are meaningless is absurd and obviously invalid, for if words which refer to these concepts were generally devoid of meaning there would be no difference between them and nonsense, and the denial and affirmation of them would be equivalent. For example, that fire is the cause of heat could never be equivalent to its opposite. Even if one denies causality, he denies a proposition whose concepts he understands.

5. According to the positivists, there is no way for scientific laws to be regarded as universal, definite

and necessary, for these characteristics do not admit of confirmation by the senses.

Cases are acceptable to them if and only if they are cases in which sensory experience is obtained (without paying heed to difficulties which arise due to the fallibility of sense perception which applies to all cases of it). That whereof sensory experience cannot be obtained, one must be silent, and one must absolutely withhold one's affirmation and denial.

6. The most important dead end down which positivists have been led is the subject of mathematics, which is explained and solved by intellectual concepts, that is, the same concepts which are meaningless in their view, as though they had been disgraced, while no sage would dare to consider the propositions of mathematics meaningless or unscientific.

Hence, a group of new positivists had no choice but to accept a kind of mental knowledge for logical concepts, and have sought to join mathematical concepts to them. This is an example of confusing logical concepts with other concepts.

It is sufficient to show the invalidity of their view to point out that mathematical concepts have instances in the external world, i.e., in technical terms, their characterization (ittisaf) is in the external world. The characteristic of logical concepts is that they do not correspond to any but mental concepts.

The Priority of Sensation or Intellect

Among Western scholars there are other forms of empiricism than positivism, which are more moderate and less fraught with difficulties. Most of them accept intellectual perception, but they still believe in some kind of priority for sense perception. Opposing them, there are other groups which believe in the priority of intellectual perception.

The subjects which are presented under the heading of 'the priority of sensation or intellect' are divided into two groups: one group is related to the evaluation of sensory and intellectual knowledge, and the preference of one over the other, and must be discussed in the lesson on the value of knowledge; the other group relates to their relative dependence or independence from one another.

Are sensation and intellect separate and independent, or is intellectual perception integrally related to sensation? The second group of subjects may also be divided into two parts: one is related to ideas and the other to affirmations. The first subject which is discussed here is the priority of sensation or intellect with respect to ideas.

In our view, after accepting the specific form of concepts, called universals, and accepting a special conceptual power called the intellect ('aql), this question presents itself: is the function of the intellect merely to change the form and to abstract and generalize sense perceptions, or does the intellect have independent perception, such that sensory perception at most can serve in some cases as a condition for intellectual perception?

Those who believe in the priority of sensation hold that the intellect has no function other than abstraction, generalization, and changing the form of sensory perceptions, in other words, there is no intellectual perception which does not follow upon sensory perception. Opposed to them, the Western rationalists believe that the intellect has independent perceptions which necessarily result from its existence, in other words, it is innate.

The intellect does not require any previous perceptions in order to have these intellectual perceptions. However, the correct view is that the intellectual perceptions of ideas which are universal concepts are always preceded by other particular individual perceptions. Sometimes that particular perception is an idea which results from sensation. Sometimes it is presentational knowledge which is basically not a kind of idea. In any case, the function of the intellect is not to change the form of sensory perceptions.

The second discussion is about the priority of sensation or intellect with respect to affirmations (tasdiqat). This must be considered as an independent subject which is not a function of the previous subject, for this subject turns on the question of whether after obtaining simple intellectual concepts, they follow upon sensation or are independent of sensation.

Is the judgment of unity between subject and predicate in a predicative proposition, or the judgment of accord or opposition of the antecedent and consequent in a conditional proposition, always dependent upon sensory experience? Or can the intellect, after obtaining the necessary imaginative concepts, judge independently, without need of help from sensory experience?

Therefore it is not true that one who believes in the priority of sensation with respect to ideas necessarily has the same view with respect to affirmations. Rather, it is possible for one to believe in the priority of sensation in the one case, but to believe in the priority of the intellect in the other.

Those who believe in the priority of sensation with respect to affirmations, who are usually called 'empiricists', believe that the intellect cannot make judgments without the help of sensory experience. Those who believe in the priority of the intellect with respect to affirmations, believe that the intellect has certain assertive perceptions perceived by the intellect independently and without need of sensory experience.

Western rationalists usually consider these perceptions to be inherent in the intellect. They believe that the intellect was created in such a way that it understands these propositions automatically. However, the correct view is that independent intellectual affirmations either originate from presentational knowledge or are obtained through the analysis of concepts of ideas and by comparing their relations with one another.

It is only by extending the meaning of "experience" to include knowledge by presence, internal intuitions (shuhud-e batini) and psychological experiences that one can consider all intellectual affirmations to require experience. In any case, intellectual affirmations do not always require sensory experience or the employment of the sense organs.

The result is that neither the opinions of the empiricists nor the rationalists, whether with respect to ideas or affirmations, are exclusively correct. The correct view regarding each case is a certain sense of the priority of the intellect. In the case of ideas, it means that intellectual concepts are not the same as the changed forms of sensory ideas. In the case of affirmations, it means that the intellect does not require sensory experience to make its own specific judgments.

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