

[Home](#) > [Philosophical Instructions](#) > [Part 3: Ontology](#) > [Lesson 21: Introduction to Ontology](#) > The Relation between Existence and Perception

Lesson 21: Introduction to Ontology

Introduction to the Lesson

Part I of this work began with an overview of the history of philosophical thought, followed by some remarks on philosophical terminology, and a brief discussion of the relation among philosophy, the sciences, and 'irfan. This part ended with a declaration of the need for and importance of philosophical inquiry.

In Part II, on Epistemology, an account was presented of the roles played by reason and experience in the formation of ideas and their relations to their instances. The aim of this account was to establish the 'value of knowledge', showing that the intellect has the ability to solve the problems of philosophy and metaphysics.

In this, the third part, we are to employ the God-given power of reason, one of the greatest of divine blessings, to survey the problems of metaphysics. Metaphysics is called 'the mother of the sciences', and is said to hold the key to the most important questions man faces in life, questions which play a most fundamental role in human destiny, regarding eternal felicity or damnation.

In this part one will find a discussion of the truth (haqiqah) of existence, the ways in which it is manifested, and the relation all existents have to one another. Prior to these discussions, however, some issues must be explained concerning concepts and the relation between concepts and their instances, and concerning words and the relation between words and their meanings, as well as some related matters.

Warnings about Concepts

It is obvious that the employment of the intellect requires the use of concepts. Concepts are irreplaceable tools of thought which must be used whenever one engages in thinking or reasoning. Even knowledge by presence, when it is to be used in thinking or reasoning, must be used by means of

mental concepts which are obtained from it.

When we indicate entified existence in the external world, and the attention of the mind is turned to that which lies beyond it, we use 'entified' and 'objective' concepts, which play the role of mirrors, or symbols and signs for the entified realities (haqayiq).

All uses of concepts in thought and reasoning are not equal. The variation in the uses of concepts stems from the essential differences among the concepts themselves. For example, there exist differences among whatish, philosophical and logical concepts, and each of these types must be further specified in a particular branch of the sciences, for these differences in the concepts pertain to the different characteristics of their employment and the ways in which the mind attends to them.

For example, the concept 'universal' cannot be understood as a mirror or sign for something objective and entified, for objective things are always existents in the form of individuals. It is impossible to apply the property of universality to an objective existent. It is with respect to this point that it is said, "Existence is equivalent to individuality."

Thus, the inapplicability of the concept of universality as a mirror or sign for something objective is due to the essential characteristics of this concept itself, which, like other logical concepts, can only be used for other mental concepts. Philosophical and whatish concepts, on the other hand, may be used to describe objective things.

In our discussions of epistemology, we divided concepts into two kinds, universal and particular. Each particular concept is a looking glass for a particular individual, and is unable to describe anything but its own individual instance.

To the contrary, universal concepts have the ability to act as mirrors for countless individuals. This bifurcation is related to the mirror-like referential and conceptual capacities of the concepts. Universal concepts themselves, however, have other aspects pertaining to their existential aspects in the mind. In this respect, things such as the existence of particular concepts and such as existences outside the mind are considered as cases of individuality, as was said in Lesson Fourteen.

The group of universal concepts which have objective instances, which in technical terms are said to have 'objective characterization' (ittisaf khariji), may also be further subdivided into two groups: whatish concepts, which group together equivalent cases and specify their whatish limits; and philosophical concepts, which refer to fundamental being and existential relations, as well as to deficiency and nothingness, but which do not represent specific whatnesses.

The concepts of the first group naturally refer to common whatnesses among individuals, or, in other words, they refer to equivalent limits among existents. The members of the second group, however, are not applied to things in this way, for their abstraction depends upon a specific intellectual point of view.

In technical terms, the occurrence ('urudh) of philosophical concepts is mental and their application to numerous different cases shows the unity of the point of view which the intellect takes toward them, however different these cases are with respect to their whatnesses and the limits of their existence, as, for example, in the case of cause, which may be applied both to material and abstract instances despite their whatish differences.

Of course, the abstraction of the concept cause from various different instances is not meaningless, but the unity of the concept does not provide reason in support of the unity of the reality (haqiqah) of its instances. It is enough that all of the instances have a certain aspect in common, that other existents depend upon them, an aspect which is determined with the effort of the intellect.

For this reason, this kind of intellectual aspect must not be confused with objective aspects and existential limits. It would be better to use the expression 'existential manners and aspects' instead of 'existential limits' regarding the philosophical concepts.

For example, we should say, "The unity of the concept of causation indicates the participation in a manner of existence, or the participation of several existents in a single aspect, that is, they are all participants in the respect that other existents are their effects, or that other existents depend upon them."

Likewise, the multiplicity of philosophical concepts, or the number of philosophical and whatish concepts which apply in a given case, does not indicate a multiplicity of the objective aspects of the case, just as it is known to us that there is but a single simple subject of our various states of consciousness and of presentational knowledge. The mind obtains numerous concepts, and it reflects them in the form compound propositions.

Also, the application of a single philosophical concept to an object, such as the concept of causation, does not provide reason to deny the application of its opposite, contrary to the case for whatish concepts. For example, if the concept of white is applied to a body, then the concept of black will not apply in the same state at the same point.

To the contrary, one may attribute to a single thing the concept of being the cause of an existent in the very state in which one attributes to it the concept of being the effect of another existent. In technical terms: contrariety in philosophical concepts requires the unity of both the aspect and what is added to it.

We have learned that one must pay attention to two points regarding the employment of concepts. First, one must take into consideration the specific characteristics of each kind of concept, so as to avoid over generalization from one kind of concept to another, and in this respect one must especially pay attention to the characteristics specific to each of these three kinds of concepts: whatish, philosophical and logical, for many philosophical difficulties are the effect of confusion about them.

The other point is that one must not fall into the trap of the fallacy of confusing concepts with their

instances, either by attributing the characteristics of concepts to their instances, or the reverse, attributing the characteristics of the instances to the concepts which apply to them.

Warnings about Language

We know that the fundamental instruments of thought and reasoning are concepts and the intelligibles, however, the communication of our thoughts and understanding is by means of words.

In the same way that concepts play the role of mirrors for the objects of the external world, words also play this same role in relation to concepts. There exists such a strong relationship between concepts and words that often when one thinks it is words which convey concepts to the mind, and on this basis, words are said to be the 'verbal existence' of things, just as concepts are considered to be their 'mental existence'.

Some have exaggerated this point to such an extent that they would reduce thinking to a kind of mental speaking, and proponents of this sort of view have been found among advocates of 'linguistic analysis' and 'analytic philosophy' who imagine that philosophical concepts have no reality beyond that of words, so that philosophical discussions are to be reduced to topics in some branch of linguistics. The shallowness of this idea was indicated to some extent in our discussions of epistemology.

Analogous confusions to those warned against with respect to concepts are possible regarding language. Sometimes the equivocal use of a word is taken to indicate a single meaning or concept, while sometimes the opposite mistake occurs and participation in a single meaning is viewed as a merely nominal agreement.

Then again, sometimes the key to the solution of a philosophical difficulty is sought in distinctions among various linguistic features, reference and metaphor, or other figures of speech. Concepts are sometimes expressed by a single word or expression because of the closeness of their meanings, and there is confusion here with the phenomenon of equivocation, as was mentioned in the fourth lesson.

In this respect one must be very careful not to mix up verbal questions with questions of real meaning, and also not to confuse the principles of language with those of meanings. In every discussion, the intended meanings must be fully specified so as to avoid mistakes due to equivocation.

The Self-evidence (Badahat) of the Concept of Existence

In Part I, we observed that prior to beginning on the questions of any science, we must first become acquainted with its topics so as to obtain correct ideas about them. Also, in every true science (i.e., science which is not simply conventional) we must become aware of the true existence of its subjects, for otherwise the discussions which pivot on this axis will be without basis or foundation and so will be unable to get anywhere.

In case the existence of the subject is not evident (badihi), it must be proven by means of one of the confirming sources of science, which is usually the function of another science which requires philosophical discussion.

We must now see how the subject of philosophy itself fares with respect to idea and assertion. According to the basic definition of first philosophy or metaphysics, the subject of this science is the 'absolute existent' or 'being qua being'. However, the concept of 'existent' is one of the most self-evident concepts abstracted by the mind from all existents.

A definition of it is neither needed nor is it possible, for just as it was said that no concept can be found which is any clearer than the concept of knowledge ('ilm), which could be used to explain it, so too, it may be argued in this case.

One of the clear indications of the self-evidence of the concept of existence is this: during our discussion of epistemology we came to know that when an item of presentational knowledge is pictured in the mind, of necessity, it takes the form of a simple proposition (halliyah basitah), the predicate of which is "existent", [e.g. "I am an existent", or "Fear is an existent"].

This is an action performed by the mind with respect to the most easy and most elementary findings which are present to it and witnessed by it. This action would not be possible if a clear concept were not obtained of existent and existence.

Reasons for doubt have been suggested regarding the concept of 'existent' or 'existence', and have given rise to heated discussions in both Western and Islamic philosophies, which will be indicated briefly below.

The Relation between Existence and Perception

Among the discussions about the concept of existence is that of Berkeley, who claimed that the meaning of 'existence' is nothing more than 'perceiving or being perceived', while other philosophers have given it different meanings, about which they have engaged in fruitless discussions whose source is the misuse of this expression ['existence']. Berkeley, however, insists on his claim, and considers it one of the fundamental principles of his philosophy.

The truth is that Berkeley is deserving of this charge, for this expression and its synonyms in all languages (like *hasti* in Farsi) have no ambiguity, and are never understood as meaning 'perceiving or being perceived'. If it so happens that in some language a synonym for 'existence' and a synonym for 'perception' have the same root, this should not interfere with its known meaning.^{[1](#)}

Among the indications of the invalidity of this claim is that existence does not have more than one meaning, while perceiving and being perceived are two different meanings. Also, the meaning of existence is a single concept in itself in which there is no relation to a subject or object.

For the same reason, it is applied to the existence of Almighty God with respect to which there is no room for imagining a subject and object, whereas, to the contrary, the meaning of perception includes a relation to subject and object.

Actually, this proposal of Berkeley's is an example of mistaking a concept for its instances. Here it is a double mistake, for he confuses the level of subsistence (thubut) with the level of proof for subsistence (ithbat) and he relates the implications of being able to prove the subsistence of an entity, perceiving or being perceived, to the subsistence of the entity as it is in itself.

Therefore, the concept of existence and the concept of perception are two distinct concepts, and the concept of neither of them is to be obtained through the analysis of the other. And the only thing which can be said is that after proving the existence of God and His omniscience, it can be said that every existent is either a perceiver or is perceived, for if an existent is not a perceiver, at least it may be said that it is subsumed under divine knowledge.

However, this [extensional] equivalence of instances, which requires proof, has no relation to the [intensional] equivalence between the concept of existence and the concept of perception.

¹. The root of the Arabic word for existence, wujud means to be found. [Tr.]

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/philosophical-instructions-muhammad-taqi-misbah-yazdi/lesson-21-introduction-ontology>