

Lesson 22: The Concept of Existence

The Unity of the Concept of Existence

Another discussion which has been raised about the concept of existence is whether existence applies to all existents with a single meaning, with an unequivocal meaning, or with different meanings, with a kind of equivocation.

The origin of this discussion is that a group of theologians imagined that the sense in which existence is used for creatures could not be used for God the Almighty. For this reason, some said that when existence is related to a thing, it takes the meaning of that to which it is related.

For example, in the case of man it will have the meaning of man, and in the case of tree, the meaning of tree. Some others, in this respect, posited two meanings, one specifically for God the Almighty, and the other for all other created things.

This sort of doubt may be traced to confusion between concepts and their instances, that is, that which cannot be compared pertaining to God the Almighty and to creatures is the instance of existence, not its concept. Differences among instances do not require differences in concept.

We also can understand the source of this confusion as being due to confusion between whatish concepts and philosophical concepts. Commonality of concept indicates a common essence among instances only when the concept is a kind of whatish concept.

However, the concept of existence is a kind of philosophical concept, and its unity only indicates an aspectual unity, which the intellect considers in order to abstract [the concept of existence], and that aspect is that of the lack of nothingness.

In their refutation of the first position, Islamic philosophers have made several claims, including the following: "If existence had the same meaning as every subject to which it is applied, this would require that in simple propositions the predication, which is a kind of common predication, should be turned into

a primary predication and be self-evident. Also, knowledge of their subject and predicate would be equivalent, so that if one did not understand the meaning of the subject, he would not understand the meaning of the predicate either.”

For the refutation of the second position there is an explanation which amounts to this: If the meaning of existence with respect to God the Almighty were anything other than its meaning with respect to contingent things, this would necessitate that the contradictory meaning of each would correspond to the other, because there is nothing of which one of two contradictories is not true. For example, each thing is either man or non-man.

The contradictory of the meaning of existence among contingent things is nothingness. So, if existence in this sense, opposed to nothingness, is not related to God, nothingness is related to the Creator, and the existence which is related to Him would really be an instance of nothingness.

In any case, one whose mind is not confused with such doubts will have no qualms about the fact that the words ‘existence’ and ‘being’ are used with one meaning in all cases, and the necessity of the unity of the concept of existence is not that all existents have a common essence.

The Substantival Concept and the Copulative Concept of Existence

The third discussion regarding the concept of existence is about equivocation regarding existence between the substantival independent sense and the copulative relative meaning.

It is explained that in logical propositions, in addition to two substantival and independent concepts (subject and predicate), there is another concept regarding the relation between them, and in Farsi this is indicated by the word *ast* (in English, *is*).

But in Arabic there is no equivalent, and a kind of sentence structure is used for this purpose (equational sentences). This concept is a kind of verbal concept, such as the concepts indicated by prepositions, which cannot be independently imagined, but must be understood in the context of a sentence.

Logicians call this verbal meaning ‘relational existence’ (*wujud rabti* or *wujud rabit*). This meaning of ‘existence’ is contrasted with its substantival meaning, which can be a real predicate, and which for this reason is called ‘predicative existence’ (*wujud mahmuli*).

Sadr al-Muta’alihin (Mulla Sadra) mentions in the *Asfar* that the use of the word ‘existence’ with its copulative meaning is a special term with a meaning other than that with which it is commonly used, while its ordinary meaning is substantival and independent, and therefore using the word ‘existence’ with these two meanings must be considered a kind of equivocation.

Some have not taken note of this point, and have considered the concept of existence to be absolutely

univocal. They have even gone so far as to try to establish entified relational existence by these concepts, explaining that, for example, when we say, “Ali is a scientist,” the expression “Ali” refers to a specific person, and for the word “scientist” there exists its science, which exists in the external world.

Therefore, the concept of the relation of the proposition which is indicated by the word “is” refers to a objective relation between science and Ali. Hence, in the context of the external world there also is established a kind of relational existence.

There is confusion here between the concepts and principles of logic with the concepts and principles of philosophy, and the principles of propositions which are about mental concepts contaminate the objective instances.

On this basis, they deny the existence of the relation in the ‘simple question’ (halliyah basitah, i.e., of the form ‘x exists’), for one cannot imagine a relation between a thing itself and its existence. But the existence of a relation in a proposition which refers to a simple thing does not require the objective existence of the relation in its instance; rather, basically, one can never consider the relation to be a entified objective thing.

What can finally be said about it is that the relation in a ‘simple question’ is a sign of the unity of the instance of the subject and the predicate, and in ‘compound questions’ it is the sign of their entified unity.

It is strange that some of the Western philosophers have denied the substantival meaning of existence (predicative existence), and they have limited the concept of existence to the copulative meaning, considering it to be a relation between the subject and the predicate. For this reason, they consider ‘simple questions’ to be pseudo–propositions, not real propositions, for they suppose that in reality such propositions do not have predicates.

The truth is that this kind of position results from weakness of mental powers of philosophical analysis, otherwise the substantival and independent concept of existence is not something to be denied, rather the copulative meaning is that which can only be established with difficulty, especially for someone in whose language there is no particular equivalent for it [the copulative meaning of existence, which has no equivalent in Arabic].

It is possible that the reason for the denial of the substantival meaning of existence is that in the language of the deniers, there is but one word which is the equivalent of the copulative and substantival meanings of existence, unlike Farsi, in which the word “hasti” (being) is used for the substantival meaning, and the word “ast” (is) is used for the copulative meaning. That is why this ambiguity has arisen such that the meaning of existence is absolutely limited to the copulative meaning.

Again we emphasize that philosophical discussions must not rely upon linguistic ones, and the principles of grammar and linguistics must not be taken as the basis for the solution of philosophical problems. We should always be careful not to allow ourselves to be misled by the features of words from the way to the

precise knowledge of concepts, nor to make mistakes about knowledge of the principles of entified existents.

Existence and Existents

Another point worth mentioning about the expressions for existence and its concept is that since the word wujud (existence) is the source from which mawjud (existent) is derived, it is an infinitive [Arabic words are typically derived from infinitives] and includes the meaning occurrence, and it is related to a subject or object, and the equivalent to it in Farsi is the word budan (to be).

Likewise, from the grammatical point of view, the expression mawjud (existent) is a passive participle and includes the meaning of the action of the verb upon the essence. Sometimes from the word mawjud (existent) an artificial infinitive is obtained in the form of mawjudiyat (being an existent), and is used as an equivalent to wujud (existence).

A word in the Arabic language which is used in an infinitive form is sometimes divested of its meaning relative to a subject or object and is used in the form of a verbal noun (ism masdar) which indicates the action of the verb itself. Therefore, with regard to wujud (existence) one may also consider this sort of meaning.

On the other hand, the meaning pertaining to the action of the verb which indicates motion, or at least indicates a state or quality, cannot be directly predicated of things. For example, one cannot predicate raftan (to go), which is an infinitive, or raftar (going), which is a verbal noun, to a thing or person, rather, either a derivation must be obtained from it, for example, the word ravandeh (goer) may be a predicate for it, or another word which includes a derived meaning should be added to it, for example, sahib-e raftar (one who is going).

The first type is technically called hu hu (it it) predication, and the second type is called dhu hu (possessor of it) predication. For instance, the predication of 'animal' to 'man' is hu hu predication, while the predication of 'life' to it is called dhu hu predication.

This discussion, as has been observed, is basically related to grammars, whose rules are conventional and differ from one language to another. Some languages are richer than others with regard to vocabulary and rules of grammar while others are more limited.

However, since it is possible that the relations between words and meanings may lead to mistakes in philosophical discussions, it is necessary to mention that in the usage of the expressions wujud (existence) and mawjud (existent) in philosophical discussions, we must not merely attend to linguistic features, but rather, basically attention to them distracts the mind from discerning the intended meanings.

In philosophy, when the word wujud (existence) is used, the intended meaning is not that of an infinitive

or the action of neither a verb, nor, when the word mawjud (existent) is used is the intended meaning the respectival one of the passive participle.

For example, when it is said of God, the Exalted, that He is “sheer existence”, is this to be interpreted in terms of the action of a verb or the relation to a subject and object, or as meaning a quality or state and its relation to the essence? Are we to quibble over how the word wujud (existence) is to be applied to God, the Exalted, when the predication of an infinitive to an essence is not correct?

When the word mawjud (existent) is applied to all realities and these include the Necessary Existent as well as contingent existents, is this to be understood in terms of the meaning of a passive participle? Is it to be argued on this basis that since a passive participle requires a subject that God also requires a subject? Or to the contrary, is it incorrect to apply it to the Necessary Existent because of that meaning, so that it may not be said that God is an existent?!

It is obvious that this sort of linguistic discussion has no place in philosophy, and not only is one unable to solve even one of the problems of philosophy by engaging in such discussion, it increases the problems and yields nothing but distortions in thought.

In order to avoid misunderstandings and fallacies, one must pay exact attention to the technical meanings of expressions, and in cases where these do not correspond to the ordinary literal meanings or a technical meaning in other sciences; this difference must be given full consideration so that one does not become the victim of confusion and error.

It follows that the philosophical concept of wujud (existence) is equivalent to absolute reality, and on this point is the opposite of nothingness, and in technical terms is its contradictory. It includes all things from the sacred divine essence to abstract and material realities, from substances to accidents and from essences to states.

When these very same entified realities are reflected in the mind in the form of propositions, at least two substantival concepts of them are obtained, one of which is associated with the subject, and is usually a whatish concept, while the other is the concept of ‘mawjud’ (existent), which is a philosophical concept, and is associated with the predicate, since its being respectival requires its being a predicate.

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