

[Home](#) > [Philosophical Instructions](#) > [Part 3: Ontology](#) > [Lesson 24: Existence and Whatness](#) > How the Mind Becomes Acquainted with Whatness

Lesson 24: Existence and Whatness

The Relation between the Topics of Existence and Whatness

According to the previous lessons, as was indicated on numerous occasions, when entified reality is pictured in the mind (the locus of acquired knowledge), it is pictured in the form of a simple question (halliyah basitah), which is composed of at least two independent substantive concepts, one of which usually serves as the subject and is a whatish concept, which can be considered in the conceptual framework of limits to an existent, and one of which is the predicate, the concept of 'existent', considered to be a secondary philosophical intelligible which denotes the occurrence of the instance of that essence. In this way two different concepts are obtained for one simple truth, each of which has its own rules and characteristics.

With regard to the concept of existence, or existent, philosophers have contented themselves with mentioning that they are self-evident intellectual concepts, without saying how the mind obtains this concept. Only recently has the late 'Allamah Tabataba'i, may Allah be pleased with him, attempted to explain how it is abstracted.

Regarding the appearance of whatish concepts, there are various opinions, which were mentioned in the section on epistemology. The opinion which we accepted was that there is a special mental power called the intellect which acquires these concepts automatically from specific percepts. The characteristic of this intellectual picturing is this very universality and ability to correspond to countless instances.

Many philosophers, especially the Peripatetics, have explained the acquiring of whatish concepts in a way which has been the source of many disputes and arguments in the course of the history of philosophy, and in most philosophical discussions, it has been especially influential.

The result of their explanations is this: when we compare several persons, for example, we see that these people, despite their differences in height, weight, skin color and other specific characteristics, all have a common truth which is the source of the common effects in them. The specific attributes of each person are really the particular specification of that person which distinguishes him from others. So, the

mind, by deleting the individual specifications acquires the universal perceptual concept of man, which is called the essence of human beings.

Therefore, the perception of several individuals of each essence is required for the direct acquisition of that essence, so that the mind, attending to individual accidental specifications and the deletion of them is able to abstract the common whatish aspect from the specific accidents and extract the universal essence. It is thus except when a whatness is known by the analysis and composition of other whatnesses without need of prior knowledge of their own individuals.

Therefore, the essence of everything in the external world is often mixed with characteristics which cause their specific qualities. Only the intellect can abstract the essence from the collection of specific accidents, and obtain the pure, sheer, abstracted essence from the specifics.

Then, that which is found after the abstraction is that very thing which exists in the external world concurrent with the individual specifications and specific accidents, and with the plurality of accidents it becomes numerous and a multiplicity. But when the mind abstracts it, it is no longer capable of being multiple. For this reason it is said that a sheer essence is unrepeatable.

Since a whatness, with that very quality of whatish unity, can correspond to a countless number of individuals, it is called a natural universal (*kulli tabi'i*), although the characteristic of being universal only applies to what is in the mind, for otherwise, as was already stated, in the external world they are realized always as mixtures with specifying accidents and in the form of individuals and particulars.

Following this, other topics are presented such as, whether natural universals themselves also exist in the external world, or are what obtains in the external world only the individuals, so that the natural universal occurs only in the mind.

There have been many discussions and disputes about this, and researchers have finally come to the opinion that in the external world the natural universals in and of themselves are not existent, but their existence is by the existence of their individuals, and the individuals play the role of intermediaries for the occurrence of natural universals.

Here another precise question can be raised, whether the mediation of the individuals in the occurrence of natural universals is fixed or accidental. In other words, does the mediation of the individuals cause the true occurrence of the natural universal with another existence other than that of the individuals? Does this cause the natural universal to have the property of being existent as its own true attribute? Or does the mediation of the individuals cause an accidental pseudo-attribution of being existent to be related to natural universals?

Another issue is the problem raised in Islamic philosophy of whether a universal may be individuated by means of specific accidents. Every accident in reality also has a whatness to which the mind attributes universality, and therefore it participates with whatnesses of that which has accidents in the need to be

individuated.

And this question can be repeated with regard to them, as to how they are to be individuated. How is the addition of a universal essence to cause the individuation of a universal essence of that which has accidents?

Finally, Farabi offered the solution that the individuation is an essential requirement of entified existence. Every essence in reality is found to be individuated by existence. Specific accidents each of which is individuated by its own existence are considered mere signs of the individuation of the essence of that which has accidents, and cannot be truly considered the cause of the individuation.

It seems that this position of Farabi is the first sprouting of the [doctrine of the] fundamentality of existence, which gradually grew until in the time of Mulla Sadra it took the form of an independent and fundamental topic in transcendent theosophy (hikmat muta'aliyyah).

With this brief explanation, along with several other indicated topics, it has become clear that the topic of the fundamentality of existence is not a topic with which to begin cold in the program of one's research.

One may guess why programs in which it is the first topic of philosophy cause the bewilderment and confusion of students, so that after spending much time on discussions concerning this, they still do not understand it correctly. So what was the motivation for this discussion? What philosophical difficulty can it solve?

In order to find an appropriate place for the problem of the fundamentality of existence by which it can be elucidated in a clear manner, we must indicate prior to this some other problems which will prepare the ground for the presentation and clarification of this subject.

We will choose correct and specific subjects, then we will present explanations of the terms and concepts needed for these discussions, and finally we will take up the discussion of the principle question. In this manner not only will the problem be solved in a clear fashion, but it will also assist in the solution of other important philosophical problems.

How the Mind Becomes Acquainted with the Concept of Existence

As has already been indicated, we have no explanation from the ancient philosophers as to how the concept of existence is abstracted by the mind, and among Islamic philosophers this subject was presented for the first time by our late professor ('Allamah Tabataba'i), may Allah be pleased with him. He has discussions of this in both Usul-e Falsafah and Nahayah al-Hikmah, which can be summarized as follows.

Man primarily finds 'by presence' the existence of a relation in propositions which is really an action of

the soul, and the mind, from this, obtains a nominal concept (mafhum-e harfi), which in Farsi is expressed by the word 'ast' (is). After that, it is viewed in an independent form, and the substantival concept of existence is abstracted 'in the possessive case'. Afterward, that qualification is deleted, and it is understood in an absolute form.

For example, in the sentence, "Ali is wise", at first the meaning of 'is' is obtained by a judgment of the soul to affix wisdom to Ali, so that the meaning of 'is' is copulative, and no idea of it is possible except through the sentence. Then it is considered in an independent form, just as the preposition 'from' is considered independently and interpreted as meaning 'origin'. It is said, the word 'from' refers to 'origin'.

In this way, the meaning of 'the attribution of wisdom to Ali' which is a possessive concept, is obtained, which includes a relational meaning. Then the possessive and relational aspect is deleted and the independent and absolute meaning of 'existence' is obtained.

But perhaps an easier explanation can be presented for how the mind becomes acquainted with the concept of existence and other philosophical concepts. An example of this will be mentioned here, and allusion will be made to it in some other cases as well.

When the soul observes within itself a non-material quality, such as fear, and after it is removed it compares two of its states: the state of fear and the state of a lack of fear. The mind then becomes disposed to abstract from the first state, the concept of the 'existence of fear' and from the second state, the concept of the 'absence of fear'. After the possessive and relational qualification is deleted by abstraction, the absolute concepts of 'existence' and 'nothingness' are obtained.

This method is also used to abstract other philosophical concepts, and by comparing two existents from a special point of view, two opposite concepts are abstracted. From this the secret of the pairing of these concepts is revealed, such as the concepts of cause and effect, objective and subjective (khariji va dhini), potential and actual, fixed and changing.

In Lesson Fifteen we explained that one of the differences between whatish concepts and philosophical concepts is that the first group is reflected in the mind automatically, while the second group requires mental activity and comparison and analysis, and here we also saw how the mind finds the disposition to abstract the two opposite concepts of existence and nothingness by comparing two states of the soul.

How the Mind Becomes Acquainted with Whatness

Aside from the position of the Platonists, according to whom the perception of whatnesses is by observing abstract truths or by remembering previous observations of them, and some other positions, most philosophers agree that the perception of whatnesses occurs by abstraction from specific objects of perception and from individuating accidents.

On this basis they consider necessary the priority of the perception of several specific and particular

things. However, first, this question can be raised, how this abstraction is accomplished for kinds for which there is only one individual? Second, regarding the accidents themselves, which they admit have whatnesses, what is to be said? For it cannot be said that for every accident that it itself has individuating accidents, so that by abstracting and peeling them off (taqshir) universal whatnesses are obtained.

Hence, some of the scholars have said that this philosophical exposition is metaphorical and is only used as an approach to the subject for new students to philosophy.

The truth is that a whatish concept is a passive perception which is obtained by the intellect, and an individual perception is sufficient for obtaining it, with no other condition. In like manner, an imaginary perception, which is an individual passive perception, is obtained by the faculty of the imagination (khayal) after a single sensory perception.

For example, when our eyes see something of a white color, an imaginary form of it is reflected in the faculty of the imagination, and its universal concept in the intellect is interpreted as the essence 'whiteness', and likewise for other sensory and specific perceptions.

That which causes it to be imagined that the perception of a universal essence is obtained through abstraction and peeling off the accidents is the fact that in this way an answer is sought to the question regarding compound things—such as man, whose elements and attributes are known by different senses and even with the help of scientific instruments, analysis and mental deduction, from which various intellectual concepts are naturally abstracted—as to how a single whatness can be related to them so that all their essences (dhatiyyat) will be included?

In such cases, it is thought that first one must know the accidental aspects of them, aspects whose change, alteration or removal does not cause the destruction of the principle of that existent. For example, if the skin color of a man changes from white to black, his humanity is not removed, and likewise for changes in the height, breadth and other physical attributes and the psychological states of a man.

Hence, all of these aspects and attributes, in relation to man, are accidental, and in order to know his essence all of them should be removed. One of the best ways for knowing which attributes are not essential is seeing whether they differ in different individuals. So, we must look at several individuals who have various attributes and accidents, and by means of the differences among them we find that none of these is essential for man, until we arrive at concepts such that if they are negated the humanity of (the individual) will not remain.

They are the same essential concepts which are common among all the individuals and which are the components of their whatness. In this way, compound whatnesses are considered to have genera and differentia, each of which indicates a specific essential aspect in the compound whatness, as is mentioned in classical logic.

But this subject is based on positive principles which must be discussed in philosophy. From among them is the question of whether each compound existent has a single existence and a single existential limit which is reflected in the mind as a single whatness. What is the standard of their true unity? How is a multiplicity of elements compatible with that unity? What is the relation between the parts with each other, and what is the relation of all of them with the whole?

Are all of the parts actively existent with respect to the whole, or is the existence of all or some of them potential with respect to the whole? Is that which is called the parts or elements of a compound existent the preparatory condition for the appearance of other simple existences, which constitute the truth of that existent, and which by negligence are all called single existences?

Suppose that there is a way to solve these and other problems completely coherent with a logical theory of genus and difference. It will still only be true of compound whatnesses. The perception of simple whatnesses can never be justified in this way. Finally, each compound essence is composed of several simple whatnesses, and the question of knowledge of the simples will remain.

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