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Lesson 25: Precepts of Whatness

Respects of Whatness

In the previous lesson we narrated from the sages that the essence of every existent in the external world is a mixed with specific accidents and pure essence obtains only in the mind. With regard to this point, we may consider two respectival conceptions of essence: one is the restricted or mixed essence which occurs in the external world, and the other is the abstract essence which may only be imagined in the mind.

The first respectival is called i'tibar bishart-e shay' (the respectival conditional on a thing) and the second is called i'tibar bishart-e la (the negatively conditioned respectival). That which is divided (maqsum) into these two is also considered a respectival of essence, and it is called i'tibar la bi shart (the unconditioned respectival), and it has neither the aspect of being in the external world, being mixed with accidents (restricted by existence), nor the aspect of being in the mind with a lack of accidents (not being in the external world), and it is called a 'natural universal' (kulli tabi'i).

It is believed that since natural universals have no restrictions or conditions, neither the condition of being mixed nor the condition of being abstract, they are assembled from both respectivals. That is, it is both in the external world with restricted essence, and also in the mind with abstract essence.

For this reason it is said, "The essence, in the respect in which it is nothing but itself, is not an existent and not a non-existent, not a universal and not a particular," that is, when we regard the essence itself, and do not consider any other aspect, we will have only a concept which includes neither the meaning of existence nor the meaning of nonexistence, neither the meaning of universality nor the meaning of particularity.

For this reason it can be the subject of the attribute of existence and it can be subject to the attribute of non-existence, it can be the subject of the attribute of being universal, and it can be the subject of the attribute of being particular, but these attributes will be external to its essence. In other words, all of these attributes are predicated in the form of common predications upon the unconditioned essence, the

natural universal, and none of these attributes are predicated in the form of primary predication, for they do not have a conceptual unity with it.

It is necessary to mention that the expressions *la bi shart* (unconditioned) and *bi shart la* (negatively conditioned) are used by philosophers in a different context to distinguish the concept of genus and difference from the concept of matter and form. It is explained that when an existent in the external world is composed of matter and form, a concept is obtained from each of them, and it is possible that the essence of a thing is composed of genus and difference.

With this difference in mind, if we consider those concepts as genus and difference then one may be predicated of the other. For example, in the case of the genus and difference of man, it can be said that man is a 'rational animal'. But if the concepts refer to matter and form, then one cannot be predicated of the other. For instance, one cannot predicate the spirit of the body. In this regard it is said that what distinguishes the concept of genus and species from that of matter and form is that genus and difference are unconditioned (*la bi shart*) while matter and form are negatively conditioned (*bi shart-e la*).

This terminology is not related to the previous one, and is simply a case of homonymity. It is necessary bear in mind that the diversity and difference of the 'respectivals of essence' (*i'tibarat mahiyyah*) are merely mental, and it is clear from the title that they are respectival, and have no entified or objective source, and in lieu of them there are no entified existents, and even if the fundamentality of essence is established, there will not be in existence this multiplicity of whatnesses.

Natural Universals

From the review of the different kinds of respectivals of essence, the definition of 'natural universal' may also be obtained, for this is the same as the divisible (*maqsami*) respectival, the 'unconditioned' essence, in which there is no kind of restriction, not even that of being abstract and lacking accidents, nor that of objective existence. It is called 'universal' because it is common among individuals, and it is called 'natural' to distinguish it from 'logical universals' and 'intellectual universals'.

By the former is meant a universal which may have other accidental concepts in the mind, and by the latter, the 'intellectual universal' is meant the universal to which accidents are applied, and which is abstract, 'negatively conditioned', which is only realized in the realm of the intellect and which is the mental instance of the concept of a logical universal.

We previously pointed out that one of the most frequently discussed topics in the history of philosophy has been that concerning the existence of natural universals, whether it can be said that they also have existence in the external world, or if it must be said that their existence is only in the mind, only for intellectual universals, that is, whatnesses abstract of accidents, so that they should be like the universals for which there are no individuals.

The proponents of the existence of natural universals have explained that by existence in the external world they do not mean that the universal obtains in the realm of the external world, but that in the external world there is something existent in common among individuals, which objectively occurs in the mind, as well, where it obtains the attribute of universality.

The proponents of the existence of natural universals have reasoned that the natural universal is that which is divided into two other respectives of essence, the mixed respective and the abstract respective, and the condition of being that which is to be divided is that both divisions should pertain to what exists.

For example, when the human is divided into two divisions, man and woman, the human, which is that from which they were divided, exists in both man and woman. So, natural universals should exist in both intellectual or abstract whatnesses and mixed or restricted whatnesses. Since the realm of the existence of mixed whatnesses is the external world, natural universals exist in the external world.

The soundness of this reasoning should be based on a true interpretation of mixed whatnesses that does not neglect anything [relevant]. An existent in the external world is truly a mixture of a whatness which has accidents and specific accidents, or is composed of essence and existence, but this cannot be proved— as was mentioned with regard to the way in which the mind becomes acquainted with whatnesses—and further explanation of it will be given in future lessons.

What is intended in speaking of the existence of a natural universal in the external world and its mixture with individuating accidents or existence is nothing more than that the intellect is able to abstract these various concepts from an objective existent, in other words, that the concept of natural universals and whatnesses are applicable to objective existents, so that the concepts of accidents and of existents are predicated of them. But it is not to be supposed that those who deny the existence of natural universals also deny their existence with this meaning.

On the other hand, those who deny the existence of natural universals in the external world have reasoned that in the objective realm there is nothing but the individual (instances) of whatnesses, therefore, there is no place for the existence of something else by the name of 'natural universal'.

With this reasoning an answer may be given, that every individual of a whatness you may consider is accompanied by accidents other than the whatness itself, such as an individual human is accompanied by height, breadth, color and other accidents. Undoubtedly, these things are not part of the human whatness, therefore, variation and change in them does not imply multiplicity and change in whatness. So, in all individuals there is the common aspect which is the natural universal.

It is clear that in this answer there is confusion between the individual by essence and the individual by accident. That is, that which is called the individual human is really a collection of individuals of various whatnesses, substantial and accidental, which due to negligence are considered as the individual human.

The principle individual which is human by essence is that same substantial individual which is the bearer of various accidents, that is, the same thing which is considered the whatish aspect of man and common among all individuals (individual accidents), and aside from this there is nothing else which might be called the 'natural universal of man'.

Finally, proponents of the existence of natural universals have claimed that by their existence in the external world it is not meant that aside from the existence of individuals there is an existence independent and separate from them, but it is considered that the existence of natural universals depends upon the existence of their individuals.

As was previously indicated, this position is open to two interpretations. One is that the existence of the individual is a means for establishing the existence of natural universals and is the cause of their occurrence, and in this way the existence of natural universals in the external world may be truly proven. But such things are not provable, for in the external world there is nothing but individuals by accident, including individuals by essence, and there is nothing which can be considered their effect.

Furthermore, universals cannot be considered the effects of individuals. The other interpretation is that the mediation of the individual for the occurrence of the natural universal is a mediation by accidents, that is, the standard for the predication of the concept of man to persons in the external world (individuals by accident) is the existence of the human substance (individual by essence, dhat) in it.

This means that this very aspect of one's humanity is a true instance by essence (bi dhat) for the concept of man. So we see that the implication of this interpretation is that it is established that there is nothing other than the individual by essence (bi dhat) along with the individual by accident.

The proponents of the existence of natural universals may content themselves with saying: "Our opinion is [that the existence of natural universals is] nothing but the correctness of the predication of a whatness of an individual, and, as has been indicated, such a meaning would not be disputed by those who deny the existence of natural universals."

For this reason some of the great scholars have said that the dispute between the proponents and opponents of the existence of natural universals is purely verbal.

The Cause of the Individuation of Whatness

As has been explained, natural universals are those whatnesses called 'unconditioned' which are considered as having no restrictions on them, but which can be combined with all sorts of restrictions and conditions, and for this reason they are combined in the mind with 'negatively conditioned' abstract whatnesses, and the attribute of universality is applied to them, while in the external world they accompany mixed whatnesses, and the attribute of particularity is applied to them.

But of course, as has been mentioned in this very lesson, the meaning of joining a natural universal with

an abstract essence or with a mixed essence is not that two independent whatnesses are joined together with each other, or are merged with one another, but the view is that two respectivals are joined, that is, when a whatness becomes established in the mind, the intellect is able to view it in two ways.

In one, the basis of the concept becomes the object of attention, without consideration of whether it has or does not have specific accidents, and this is the 'unconditioned' respectival, the natural universal; in the second it is considered bare of accidents, and this is the 'negatively conditioned' respectival.

In the same way the intellect can consider the essence of the existent in the external world in two ways: first, as the basis of the essence common between the mind and the external world, that is the 'unconditioned' respectival, the natural universal; and secondly, with respect to being mixed with accidents, that is, the restricted 'negatively conditioned' respectival.

Now, if those who explain whatnesses and respectivals in this way are asked what requires the application of a natural universal to a particular while essentially it is not required to have such attribution, or, what is the standard for the individuation of essence, naturally they will answer that what requires the attribution of essence to particularity and individuation is that very mixture of it with specific accidents, a requirement of the essence for existence in the external world, so that what requires the application of the essence to universality is its lack of these accidents, required by the essence for existence in the mind.

An implication of this answer is that, if an objective existent were without accidents it would be universal, and likewise, if mental essence were attached to accidents, it would become particular. This answer, however, is by no means convincing, because this question may be repeated with respect to the essence of each accident: what causes the particularity and individuation of them, so that the essence of that which has accidents will also depend upon their specification?

Furthermore, the implication of this answer, that if the mental essence is attached to accidents it becomes particular and if the objective essence becomes bare of accidents it becomes universal, is not acceptable, for the universality of intellectual concepts is their ability to correspond to numerous instances and to reflect countless individuals, and this ability is not negated by coming to be attached to accidents.

Also, the external existent is not such that if it is without accidents it may be supposed that it is able to have countless instances. Abstract entities are not to be considered denoting countless individuals cannot be found in them.

Thus, some philosophers have decided to search for the standard of individuation of whatnesses in other things, such as matter, time and place. But it is clear that having recourse to such things is of no use, for all of them the problem remains of the standard for the individuation of the essence of matter, or of time or place. And to approach an answer to this problem requires the individuation of other whatnesses.

In conclusion, adding a thousand universal whatnesses lacking individuation to another universal and unspecific essence will not individuate it, regardless of whether it is a substantial or accidental essence.

As far as we know, the correct way to solve the problem of the criterion for the individuation of whatnesses was first presented by the great Islamic philosopher, Farabi. According to this solution, individuation is the essential necessary result of existence, and whatness is only made determinate in the shadow of existence.

That is, no essence can be individuated or made determinate by that aspect of it in which it is a universal concept which can be applied to numerous individuals and instances, regardless of how many dozens of qualifications are added as a means to restrict it to a single individual, for, finally, the intellect will not consider it impossible that this very same qualified concept can be imagined to apply to numerous other individuals, even if in the external world there is not more than one such individual.

So, the criterion of individuation cannot be found in the addition and conjunction of other whatnesses. However, it is entified existence that essentially cannot be applied to other existents, not even to one other individual existent. And basically, application and predication and concepts of this sort are characteristic of concepts.

In conclusion, it is existence that essentially individuates. Every essence which is attributed to particularity and specification only does so in the shadow of unity with existence.

This answer of Farabi is the source of the change in the view of the philosophers, and it truly must be considered as the turning point in the history of philosophy. For until then, all philosophical discussions, no matter how unconsciously, were based on the idea that existence in the external world could only be known by whatnesses, and in truth, whatnesses figured as the pivot of all philosophical discussions.

However, since then the attention of philosophers returned to existence, and they considered entified existence as having special precepts which cannot be known by means of whatish precepts.

However, unfortunately, the illumination of this point was not able to penetrate all philosophical discussions rapidly, and change the face of philosophy very soon. It took centuries until this sprout grew and finally the great Islamic philosopher, the late Sadr al-Muta'allihin Shirazi (Mulla Sadra) officially posed the topic of the fundamentality of existence as the most basic principle of transcendent theosophy.

However, he also, in most of his discussions, did not abandon the way of his predecessors. Especially in the presentation of various philosophical topics, he followed the method of his predecessors. It was only in the final exposition of views and in drawing conclusions that he proposed his own opinion based on the fundamentality of existence.

Before concluding this discussion it is necessary to mention that the subjects discussed in this lesson,

concerning the respectivals of existence and especially the existence of natural universals in the external world, take on a totally different aspect on the basis of the fundamentality of existence.

Basically, the existence of mixed whatnesses may also be considered as intellectual respectivals.

Perhaps the aware reader will discover from the subjects of this lesson that the true existence of natural universals.

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