

Lesson 26: Introduction to the Fundamentality of Existence

[A Brief Look at the History of the Problem](#)

As was previously mentioned, prior to Farabi almost all philosophical discussions were centered about whatnesses, or at least were unconsciously based on the fundamentality of whatness, and in statements reported from the Greek philosophers, no clear indications are to be found of any tendency toward the fundamentality of existence. But among the Islamic philosophers, such as Farabi, Ibn Sina, Bahmanyar and Mir Damad, not only is this tendency to found, but there are also declarations of position on the topic.

On the other hand, Shaykh al-Ishraq [Suhrawardi], who paid particular attention to intellectual concepts (i'tibarat 'aqli), took up a position against the tendency toward the fundamentality of existence, and he sought by proofs for the respectival nature of the concept of existence to invalidate this tendency, although in his own statements points may be found which are more compatible with the fundamentality of existence, and which do not properly justify the doctrine of the fundamentality of whatness.

In any case, Sadr al-Muta'allihin was the first to place this topic at the head of discussions of ontology, and he suggested solutions to other problems on this basis. He says: "At first I myself was a proponent of the fundamentality of whatness and I defended it vigorously until, by the grace of God, I found the truth of the matter."¹

He attributed the doctrine of the fundamentality of existence to the peripatetics and the doctrine of the fundamentality of whatness to the illuminationists. However, since the topic of the fundamentality of existence had not previously been presented as an independent topic and the concept of it had not been previously explained, philosophers cannot easily be grouped specifically and definitively in relation to it, so as to characterize the peripatetics doctrine of the fundamentality of whatness as a feature of the illuminationists.

Supposing, however, that this classification is correct, one must not forget that the fundamentality of existence was not presented by the followers of the peripatetics in such a way that it could take its proper place among the problems of philosophy to shed light on the solution of other philosophical problems. Rather, the peripatetics often presented and explained philosophical problems in a way which was more compatible with the doctrine of the fundamentality of whatness.

Explanation of Terms

In order to clarify this topic and completely specify the area of controversy it is first necessary to provide explanations of the terms used regarding the problem, and then to precisely determine the purport of the topic and area of conflict.

This problem is usually presented by posing the question of whether existence is fundamental and whatness respectival or whether whatness is fundamental and existence respectival. However, Sadr al-Muta'allihin himself presented the problem in the following form. Existence possesses objective reality. The implicit purport of this is that whatness does not possess objective reality. Thus, the pivotal expressions of this topic are existence, whatness, fundamentality, respectival, and reality.

However, we have already explained the expression, 'existence,' which is sometimes used as an infinitive (masdar) (to be), and sometimes as a verbal noun (ism-e masdar) (being), and also sometimes it is used by logicians with a copulative meaning (is).

It is clear that in this philosophical discussion the copulative meaning is not under consideration, and likewise the infinitive which indicates a relation between subject and object is not meant. The meaning of the verbal noun, in the restricted sense of occurrence, is also not meant, unless the above restriction is removed so that it may be predicated of objective realities including the sacred Essence of God.

The expression 'whatness' (mahiyyah) which is a contrived infinitive (masdar ja'li) derived from 'What is it?' (ma huwa?) is used as a philosophic term in the form of a verbal noun (ism-e masdar, 'what-is-it-ness') but with the same condition of dissociation from the sense of occurrence, so that it may be predicated of an essence.

This term is used in philosophy in two senses, one of which is more general than the other. The specific sense is defined as "that which is said in answer to the question 'What is it?'" and naturally it is applied in the case of an existent which can be known by the mind, in technical terms, that which possesses specific limits of existence, which are reflected in the mind in the form of primary intelligibles (whatish concepts).

For this reason it is said that God the Almighty does not have a whatness: "There is no whatness of the Necessary Existent." Proponents of the fundamentality of existence say with regard to the objective reality of existence, "Existence itself has no whatness," and sometimes that "it does not have an

intellectual form.”

But the more general sense is defined as ‘that which the thing itself is.’ This includes both the objective reality of existence as well as the sacred Essence of God. It is in accordance with this meaning that it is said with regard to God Almighty, “The whatness of God is the same as His identity (inniyyah).”

In this discussion what is meant by the expression ‘whatness’ is the former meaning, not the concept represented by the word whatness itself in the sense of primary predication. Rather the discussion is about the instances of this concept, that is, whatness in the sense of common predication, such as ‘man’. For the proponents of the fundamentality of whatness also admit that this concept itself is a respectival concept.² In other words, the discussion is about whatish concepts (mafahim mahuwi), not the concept of whatness.

The expression ‘fundamentality’ (asalah) which is used with the literal meaning of being a root and is the opposite of ‘far’iyyah’ which has the meaning of being an offshoot in this context, is employed with a specific meaning as the opposite of ‘i’tibari’ (respectival), and their precise meanings are jointly clarified.

In Lesson Fifteen several technical meanings of the expression i’tibari (respectival) were mentioned, according to some of which, even the concept of existence was called a respectival concept. But in this context, the meaning of i’tibar, being the opposite of asil (fundamental), is different. The respectival nature of the concept of existence, according to the previous meaning, is compatible with the doctrine of the fundamentality of existence and the ‘respectival’ nature of whatness according to the meaning appropriate to this context.

What is meant by the two opposite concepts of asil and i’tibari here pertains to the question as to which of the two, the whatish concepts or the concept of existence, refers to entified reality in itself (dhatan) without mediation, in the precise philosophical sense.

That is, after it is accepted that an objective reality is reflected in the mind in the form of a ‘simple existential proposition’ (halliyyah basitah), whose subject is a whatish concept and whose predicate is the concept of existence (wujud) which by means of a [morphologically] derived predicate may be put in the form of the concept of ‘existent’ (mawjud), so that each of these terms will be predicable of that entified reality, so that it may be said, for example, “This foreigner is human,” as it can be said, “This person is existent.” Neither of these is metaphorical from a common or literary point of view.

At the same time, from a precise philosophic point of view, it may be asked—in view of the unity and simplicity of the entified reality and the multiplicity of these concepts and aspects, which is characteristic of the mental realm—whether the entified reality (of which the concept of existence is predicated with the special attention of the intellect and by mediation of the whatish concept, and which [i.e. the concept of existence] for this reason is a secondary and subordinate aspect) is to be identified with the whatish aspect, or whether the objective reality is that very aspect denoted by the concept of existence (so that the whatish concept is merely a mental reflection of the limits and framework of the reality and objective

existence), and in fact it is the whatish concepts which are secondary and subordinate.

With regard to this question, if we take the first alternative and understand entified reality to be the unmediated instance of whatness, we would be upholding the fundamentality of whatness and the respectivalness of existence. And if we take the second alternative and understand entified reality to be the unmediated instance of the concept of existence, and we consider whatish concepts a mental framework setting the limits for finite realities, we will be proponents of the fundamentality of existence and the respectivalness of whatness.

The expression haqiqah employed by Sadr al-Muta'allihin in discussing this problem is also an expression used in various senses, such as the following:

1. Haqiqah [literal usage] is the use of a word in its literal meaning, as opposed to majaz, its metaphorical usage, i.e., with another meaning with a sort of relation to the literal meaning. For example, the use of the word 'lion' in the sense of the well-known wild animal is haqiqah, while its use to mean a powerful man is a metaphor.
2. Haqiqah [truth] also has the meaning of knowledge that corresponds to reality, as in the previous discussions of epistemology.
3. Haqiqah may have the meaning of whatness, as when it is said of two individual humans that they are 'muttafiq al-haqiqah' [i.e., of a common reality].
4. Haqiqah in the sense of entified reality.
5. Haqiqah, in the terminology of mysticism ('irfan), is used in the sense of absolute independent existence which is confined to God, the Supreme, and it is so used in contrast to the existence of creatures, which is said to be 'metaphorical' (majazi).
6. Haqiqah also has the meaning of core and inner reality (batin), as when it is said that haqiqah of the Divine Essence cannot be fathomed by the intellect.

It is clear that the intended meaning of haqiqah here is that of the fourth term.

Explanation of the Point of Contention

There is no doubt that every existent which has a whatish concept may be predicated by that concept, as the concept 'human being' may be predicated of persons in the external world.

Likewise, there is no doubt that the concept of existence (in the form of derivative predication (haml ishtiqaq), e.g., mawjud, (existent), derived from wujud, (existence)) may be predicated of every existent in the external world, and even in the case of God, the Supreme, Who does not have a whatness, it may be said that He is existent.

In other words, from an intellectual perspective every existent that has contingent existence has two aspects: one is the aspect of whatness, and the other is the aspect of existence. As the philosophers have said, “Every contingent thing is a composite duality and composed of whatness and existence.” This is the same matter which we have repeatedly indicated, namely that reflections of objective realities in the mind take the form of propositions which are usually (that is, for things with whatnesses) composed of a whatish concept and the concept of existence.

With regard to this matter, if it is supposed that for each of these two concepts there exists an objective entified aspect—that the whatish concept refers to one entified aspect and the concept of existence refers to the other entified aspect, which are joined together in the external world—or, in other words, an existent is composed of existence and whatness, and this composition is objective and entified, the meaning of this supposition would be that both whatness and existence are fundamental (asil).

But this supposition is not correct, for if each existent were to possess two entified aspects, each of them would be reflected in the mind in the form of a different proposition, which would include two concepts, and for each of them one would have to suppose another entified aspect, and this process would be continued without end, and the result of this would be that every simple existent should be composed of an infinite number of entified objective aspects.

This is what is meant by the statement of the philosophers that the difference between existence and whatness is a mental difference: “Existence is an accident of whatness in conception, and they are united in identity.”

That is, the predication and characterization (‘urudh) of existence to whatness, which requires each of them to be different from the other, obtains exclusively in the realm of mental conception, otherwise in external identity (huwiyah) they are one with each other. So, it cannot be that both whatness and existence are fundamental and considered to have entified reality.

Likewise, both cannot be viewed as respectivals. For ultimately, it is that very simple proposition which denotes entified reality and which must include a concept corresponding to entified reality. So, there is a choice between whatness being fundamental and existence being respectival or vice versa. Therefore, the problem may be posed in the form of two hypotheses based on several principles:

1. The acceptance of the concept of existence as an independent substantival concept, in technical terms, the acceptance of ‘predicative existence’. For if the concept of existence is confined to the copulative meaning and is relational in propositions it would be impossible to suppose that it should refer to entified reality, and in the words of Sadr al-Muta’allihin, that it should possess entified reality (haqiqah ‘ayniyyah), and there would be no alternative but the fundamentality of whatness.

2. Acceptance of the analysis of contingent existents into two (concepts): the concept of existence and whatish concepts. That is, if someone imagines that the concept of existence is not something other than the concept of whatness, as has been reported of some of the mutakallimin, according to whom the

meaning of existence in every proposition is the same as the meaning of the whatness which makes up its subject, on this assumption there remains no room for doubt between the fundamentality of whatness and the fundamentality of existence, and it would determine the fundamentality of whatness. But the invalidity of this supposition became clear in Lesson Twenty-Two.

3. Acceptance of the fact that the combination of existence and whatness is a mental combination, that in the context of the external world there do not exist two distinct aspects, one of which corresponds to the whatish concept and the other of which to the concept of existence, that is, the hypothesis of the fundamentality of both is incorrect, as explained.

4. On the basis of these three principles, the question may be presented in this form: Does entified reality principally correspond to the whatish concept, such that the concept of existence is predicated of it accidentally, or the reverse, does entified reality principally correspond to the concept of existence, such that the whatish concept is predicated of it accidentally?

In other words: Is entified reality in itself an instance of whatness or existence? On the first hypothesis, knowledge of whatnesses and the principles pertaining to whatness is the same as knowledge of entified reality; but on the second hypothesis, knowledge of whatnesses means the knowledge of the framework of existents and their limits which are reflected in the mind, not knowledge of their entified contents.

The Benefits of the Discussion

It is possible that one may imagine that the discussion about the fundamentality of existence or whatness is an academic exercise and that it has no relevance to the solution of important philosophical problems, for these problems have been solved both by the proponents of the fundamentality of existence as well as the proponents of the fundamentality of whatness.

But this idea is incorrect, for, as will become clear in the course of future discussions, the solution of many of the important problems of philosophy depends on the fundamentality of existence, and the way of solving them through the fundamentality of whatness is unsatisfactory and leads to a dead end. As we have seen with regard to the problem of the individuation of whatnesses, there is no correct solution on the basis of the fundamentality of whatness.

Of course, this problem, compared to more important problems [whose solutions are] based on the fundamentality of existence, is relatively minor. If we were to mention all such cases, our discussion would become too long. Furthermore, the explanation of the relation of these problems to the fundamentality of existence requires the presentation of these problems and reference to some sensitive points which must be explained in their appropriate place.

Here we will only mention two very important problems of philosophy, each of which in its own turn may serve as a basis for solving other valuable problems: one of them is the problem of causation and the

reality of the relation between cause and effect, the conclusion of which, based on the fundamentality of existence, is the dependence of the effect on the 'being- granting cause' ('illat-e hasti bakhsh), on the basis of which very important problems can be solved, including the refutation of jabr (predestination) and tafwidh (libertarianism) and [explanation of] the unity of [Divine] acts (tawhid af'ali). Another problem is that of substantial motion, intensifying (ishtidadi) and evolutionary (takamuli), whose interpretation depends on the acceptance of the fundamentality of existence, the elaboration of which will be presented in its proper place.

Therefore, the problem of the fundamentality of existence is one of the most serious and fundamental which is worthy of study, and must never be treated in a casual and offhand manner.

[1.](#) Asfar, Vol. 1, p. 49.

[2.](#) Cf. Suhrawardi's Muqawamat, p. 175; Mutarahat, p. 361, in Henry Corbin, ed., Shihaboddin Yahya Sohrawardi, Œuvres Philosophiques et Mystiques, Tome 1 (Tehran: Académie Impériale Iranienne de Philosophie, 1976).

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