

Lesson 27: The Fundamentality of Existence

Arguments for the Fundamentality of Existence

Our aim is to know whether entified reality is the same as that which is denoted by whatish concepts or whether whatnesses only represent limits and frameworks for objective realities. If whatnesses only represent limits of existence, that which denotes the reality itself and the contents of a conceptual framework is the concept of existence which is considered to indicate reality itself.

The mind, by means of the concept of existence, understands reality itself. In order to know whether whatness is fundamental or existence, there are various ways, of which the easiest is reflection upon these concepts themselves and their meanings.

When we focus upon a whatish concept, such as the concept of ‘man,’ we see that existence may be negated of it without changing its meaning, no matter how many external existents to which it applies, and of which it may be predicated, where this predication is literal, according to ordinary language, and not metaphorical.

This is a matter upon which philosophers are agreed, namely, that whatness, in that it is whatness, is neither an existent nor a nonexistent. It neither requires existence nor nonexistence (al-mahiyyah min haythu hiya hiya laysat illa hiya, la mawjudatun wa la ma’dumah, i.e., Whatness as such is what it is [and only that], it is neither existent, nor nonexistent).

It is for this same reason that whatness may be both the subject for existence and for nonexistence. Therefore, whatness in and of itself cannot represent objective reality, otherwise the predication ‘nonexistent’ to it would be considered the predication of one of a pair of contradictories to the other, such as is the case with the predication of existence to nothingness.

Another reason that whatness does not represent entified reality is that in order to denote an objective reality we have no choice but to employ a proposition which includes the concept of existence and until we predicate existence of a whatness we will not have spoken of its real occurrence. And this very point

is the best reason for claiming that it is the concept of existence which denotes entified reality. According to Bahmanyar, in the book *Al-Tahsil*, “How can existence not possess entified truth when its meaning is nothing but real occurrence?”¹

Some of the advocates of the fundamentality of whatness have said: “It is true that whatness itself in itself lacks existence and nothingness, and does not demand either of them, and in this sense can be considered respectival, but when it is related to the Maker (Ja‘il) it obtains objective reality. And it is with regard to this matter that it is said that whatness is fundamental.”

It is clear that a relation that accompanies the occurrence of whatness in reality is due to causing it to exist, that is, the granting of existence to it, and this shows that its reality is that very existence which is granted to it.

Another reason for the respectivalness of whatness is that basically the analysis of entified reality into two aspects, whatness and existence, occurs only in the mind through acquired knowledge. In presentational knowledge no trace of whatness is found.

So, if whatness were fundamental, then it would have to be realized through presentational knowledge, as well, for it is in knowledge by presence that entified reality itself is perceived or observed internally without the intermediary of any mental form or concept.

It is possible that to this argument the objection will be raised that just as there is no trace of whatish concepts in knowledge by presence, we see no trace in it of the concept of existence. In other words, just as whatish concepts are obtained by mental analysis, the concept of existence also occurs in the realm of mental analysis. Therefore, it cannot be said that existence is also fundamental.

In response to this objection, it must be said that there is no doubt that the two aspects, whatness and existence, can be distinguished from one another only in the realm of the mind. Their duality is specific to the realm of mental analysis, and for the same reason the concept of existence also, insofar as it is a mental concept, is not the same as objective reality, and is not fundamental.

But, nevertheless, this same concept is a means for denoting that which has objective reality, from which the whatish concept is abstracted, and this is what is meant by the fundamentality of existence and its having entified reality.

In addition to this, it became clear in the previous lecture that the choice between the fundamentality of existence and that of whatness is exhaustive, so that with the invalidity of the fundamentality of whatness, the fundamentality of existence is established.

Another argument for the fundamentality of existence and the respectivalness of whatness is that, as was mentioned in Lesson Twenty-Five, an essential aspect of whatness is that it is not an individuating aspect, while the whatish aspect of external realities is an individuating aspect and is not universal,

applicable to [different] individuals, and no external realities as such can be subjects of the attribute of universality and the lack of individuality.

In other words, individuality and particularity can only be applied to a whatness when it has external existence. From this it is to be understood that whatish aspects are those conceptual and mental aspects that have the capability of being applied to countless individuals, and entified reality is specific to existence, that is, entified reality is the essential instance of existence.

Another argument for the fundamentality of existence also can be raised, based on that which is accepted by the philosophers, that the sacred Divine Essence is free of any limitation which could be denoted by whatish concepts; that is, there is no question of Its having a whatness, and He is the most fundamental of realities and is the bestower of reality to all existents. If external reality were an essential instance of whatness, then the reality of the Divine Essence would also have to be a whatness like other whatnesses.

Of course, this argument is based on a premise which must be proved in the section on theology, but since this is accepted by the proponents of the fundamentality of whatness also, it can also be used here, and at the very least may be used in argument with them as ‘sound dialectic’.[2](#)

Philosophical Metaphor

Here it is possible that a doubt will come to mind according to which the basis of the fundamentality of existence is that entified reality is an essential instance of existence, which implies that it will accidentally be an instance of whatness.

This means that the predication of a whatness, such as man, to individuals external to it will be accidental and by occurrence (‘urudh), and the characterization (ittisaf) of this concept will be metaphorical, which can be negated. Therefore, it must be that the negation of the concept of man of its individuals in the external world is correct, and this is nothing but sophistry.

The answer is that just as in the first argument [for the fundamentality of existence] we mentioned that the predication of every whatness to individuals external to it, from the ordinary viewpoint and from that of grammar, is a true predication without any figure of speech; however, precise philosophical precepts do not follow those of ordinary [language] and grammar with respect to the literal and the metaphorical.

So the key to their understanding cannot be sought among the rules related to language. Often these rules will be employed in such a way that with respect to grammar something will be literal, while with respect to philosophy, it will be metaphorical, and vice versa.

For example, the scholars of grammar and theoretical jurisprudence (usul al- fiqh) say that the literal meaning of ‘derivatives’ (mushtaqat) is something possessing the whatness of the source of derivation (ishtiaq) (“The essential meaning of mushtaq [derivative] is something with an established source”);

for instance, 'alim (knower) means someone who has 'ilm (knowledge) and mawjud (existent) means something which has wujud (existence).

So, if the expression mawjud (existent) is used for entified existence (wujud) itself, then from the point of view of grammar, this would have to be a metaphorical usage, but from the point of view of philosophy, it is not.

The same point applies here. From the viewpoint of ordinary usage, there is no separation between the limit and the limited, and just as a limited existent is considered to be a real thing, its limits are also construed to be real entified things, while from the point of view of philosophy this is not the case, and the limits of existents, in fact, are abstracted from matters relating to nonexistence. Their being considered as real is metaphorical and respectival.

In order to make this clearer to the mind, the following example is given. If we take a piece of paper and from it we cut the various shapes of a triangle, a square, etc., we will have bits of paper, each of which, in addition to being paper, will have another attribute by the name of triangle, or square, etc., such that prior to cutting the paper they did not have these attributes.

The ordinary construal of this case is that specific forms and attributes came into existence in the paper, and that aspects of existence were added to the paper, while nothing came into existence in the mentioned paper except for edges which are aspects relating to nonexistence.

In other words, the edges which form the limits and bounds of various shapes are nothing but the ultimate ends of the surface of various bits of paper, and even the surface itself is really the ultimate end of the thickness of the paper.

However, these limits and bounds which have the nature of nonexistence, are construed from the ordinary superficial perspective as existing things and entified attributes, and the negation of their existence is considered a sort of denial of what is self-evident.

We should add that the same is true of the whatish concept (like paper in the example) in relation to entified reality; that is, it refers to specific limits of reality (of course, conceptual limits, not geometrical limits), limits which are considered as the empty molds for realities, and their contents are composed of entified reality.

Whatnesses are nothing but these very conceptual molds for external reality. But since they are the means and mirrors for the knowledge of external existents and cannot be viewed independently, they are construed as external realities themselves. This is the meaning of the respectivalness of whatness, that is, whatnesses are supposed to be realities, or the concepts are considered as the external instances themselves.

Thus, the mind may be compared to a mirror the reflections appearing in which are whatish concepts by

means of which we are informed of the limits of external realities and kinds of existence. In this view, [wherein the mind plays the function of] an instrument and mirror, we do not notice the reflections themselves independently, but rather by way of them our attention is directed to that which is reflected, that is, the entified reality. For this reason we suppose that the reflections are that which is reflected.

Likewise, when one looks at one's reflection in a mirror one supposes that one is looking at oneself while that which is seen in the mirror is a reflection of the colors and contours of one's face, that is, a reflection of limits and not of that which is limited itself. However, from a superficial point of view we can say that that which we see in the mirror is our own faces.

The predication of whatnesses to existents is of the same sort. However much from the ordinary way of looking at things it is considered to be a true predication, from the exact perspective of philosophy, it becomes clear that it is only a reflection of their molds, not of them themselves. That is why Sadr al-Muta'allihin repeatedly emphasized in his books that 'whatness is a phantom of the mind or intellectual mold for entified reality.'³

With these explanations it has become clear that the real locus of whatnesses, insofar as they are whatnesses, is only the mind and its entified occurrence is its individual existence. From the exact perspective of philosophy, the whatness is never in itself that which entifiedly occurs [that is, as an entity]. So, the existence of mixed whatnesses, and consequently, the existence of natural universals in the external world, may also only be accepted as respectival, as was indicated at the end of Lesson Twenty-Five.

Hence, it may be said that to claim true existence for natural universals is the same as holding the position of the fundamentality of whatness, and to claim that the existence of natural universals is accidental and that individuals are the means of the occurrence ('urudh) of existence for natural universals is really the same position as the fundamentality of existence; that is, natural universals, which are the same as whatnesses, are respectival things. Their relation to existence and occurrence in the external world is accidental and a kind of philosophical metaphor.

The Resolution of Two Doubts

The proponents of the fundamentality of whatness have raised certain doubts, among which two of the most important are:

First Objection: If existence were basic and possessed entified reality, it would have to be predicable by the concept 'existent,' and this would mean that existence possesses existence. So, another entified existence would have to be posited for it, which in turn would become the subject of 'existent.' This process would continue without end.

This implies that every existent possesses infinite existences! From this it is to be understood that

existence is respectival, and that the repeated predication of 'existent' to it is a product of this mental derivation.

Answer: The origin of this fallacy is reliance on grammatical rules according to which the word 'existent' (mawjud) with regard to its being a derivative (mushtaq), refers to an 'essence' which is posited for the source of the derivation (mabda' ishtiqaq) (existence, or wujud in this case).

This implies the plurality of essence and source (mabda'). Thus, when the concept 'existent' is predicated of entified existence, it must be supposed that it is an essence for which is established the source of derivation, which is something else, and so on and so forth.

However, we have repeatedly warned that philosophical problems cannot be solved or settled on the basis of linguistic rules of grammar and syntax. The concept of 'existent' in philosophical usage is merely an indicator of entified objective occurrence, regardless of whether the aspect of objective occurrence in the realm of mental analysis is other than an aspect of the subject of the proposition or not.

For example, when this concept [i.e., existent] is predicated of a whatness, there is considered to be a plurality and difference between the subject and predicate, but when it is predicated of entified existence itself, this means that objective existence is the very aspect of its being existent.

In other words, the predication of a derivative (mushtaq) to an essence is not always an indication of plurality and difference between the essence and the source of the derivation. Rather, sometimes it indicates their unity. From this it is to be concluded that the meaning of the predication of 'existent' to entified existence is that it itself is that very being existent and entified reality and source of abstraction of the concept 'existent,' not that it becomes an existent by means of some other existence.

Second Objection: The other fallacy is the claims that if entified reality is an essential instance of existence this would mean that every reality exists by itself. This implies that every objective reality would be a necessary existent (wajib al- wujud), while only God, the Supreme, is existent-by-Himself.

Answer: The origin of this fallacy is a confusion between two senses of 'essentially' (bi al-dhat), and it is really an error of equivocation.

To explain, the expression 'essentially' (bi al-dhat, i.e., essentially or by itself) is sometimes used as the opposite of 'by another' (bi al-ghayr), meaning that it has no intermediary by which it is established, as it is said with respect to God, the Supreme, that He is 'existent-by-Himself' (mawjud bi al-dhat) or 'necessarily existent-by-Himself,' that is, not through something else, and He is not caused by any creator. To put it differently, the predication of 'existent' or 'necessary existent' to Him does not need any intermediary by which it would be established.

The same expression, essentially (bi al-dhat), is sometimes also used as the opposite of accidentally (bi al-'aradh), meaning that the predication of the predicate does not need an intermediary in its occurrence

(‘urudh), even if it does need an intermediary in its establishment (thubut), as, in accordance with the fundamentality of existence, we say: “Entified reality is an ‘essential’ instance of existent, but whatness is an accidental instance of it.”

According to the second sense, both the existence of God, the Supreme, which has no intermediary in its establishment and according to the first sense is also ‘essential,’ is an essential instance of existence, and also the existence of creatures, which is established by an intermediary, caused by the Creator.

This means that being an existent is the true attribute of their existence, not the attribute of their whatness. From a philosophical point of view, existence is accidentally attributed to whatnesses.

[1.](#) Cf. Al-Tahsil, p. 286

[2.](#) Sound dialectic, jadal ahsan, is argument based on premises that are not only accepted by both sides but are also correct. [Tr.]

[3.](#) Cf. Al-Asfar, Vol. 1, p. 198; Vol. 2, p. 236.

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