Lesson 28: Unity and Multiplicity

Remarks on Some Issues Pertaining to Whatnesses

Essential concepts are either simple or compound. Two simple whatish concepts naturally cannot have a common aspect and will be completely distinct from one another, for it is supposed that there is a common aspect between them, which would be their own simple whatness, so that there would be no other aspect by which they could be distinguished, then they would not be numerically distinct and there would not be more than a single whatness.

If it is supposed that in addition to their common aspect each of them has a distinguishing aspect, then each of them would be composed of two whatish aspects, which is contrary to the supposition that they are simple.

So, two simple whatish concepts must be distinct in their entirety (bi tamam al-dhat). However, if one or both of them are compound, they may be supposed to have different forms.

In classical logic, compound whatnesses have at least two parts, one common part called the genus, which is a vague and indeterminate concept, obtained through comparison (tardid) among several different species, and one specific part called the difference, which causes the determination of the genus (to a single species). It is said that the whatness of man is composed of the concept of 'animal' and the concept of 'rational,' the first of which is common between the species of animals, and the second of which is the specific difference of man.

The concept of genus, in turn, can also be compound, having a higher and more general genus, as the concept of 'body' includes animal, vegetable and mineral. But the concepts of differences are considered simple and incapable of being compound.

Finally, for all compound whatnesses, ten highest simple genera, or ten 'categories' are supposed, as follows: substance (jawhar), quantity (kamiyyah), quality (kayfiyyah), relation (idhafah), posture (wadh'), spatial locus (ayna), temporal locus (mata), possession (jadah), action (an yaf'al) (states of gradual

effects), passion (an yanfa'il) (states of being affected passively and gradually).[1]

Regarding the number of the categories (the highest genera), and whether they are all really whatish concepts (first intelligibles), or at least whether some of them (such as relation and categories which are composed of relational concepts) are secondary intelligibles, there is controversy among the philosophers, but we shall not consider this matter further.

According to the logical apparatus of genus and difference, and based upon [the idea that] all compound whatnesses lead to some categories, they may be distinguished in two ways. One is a distinction among them in their entirety, and that is when two whatnesses pertaining to two categories are compared there is not even a common genus between them, for example, the concept of man and the concept of whiteness.

Secondly, their distinction may be partial, in case two whatnesses are compared from a single category, for example, the concept of horse and the concept of cow, which are common in animality, corporeality, and substantiality.

It may be concluded that whole whatnesses (species), if simple, will be distinguished and distinct from each other in their entirety; likewise if they are compound and from two categories. Also differences and highest genera, which are all considered to be simple concepts, are distinguished from one another in their entireties. No genus may be supposed to include all whatnesses. Therefore, there is not even one whatish element which can be considered to be common among all whatnesses.

On the other hand, the concept of existence, which is a secondary philosophical intelligible, is considered to be a simple, determinate, general and absolute concept which when added to a whatness individuates and limits it. The concept of existence specified and limited in this way is called a 'share' (hissah, lit. also 'part,' 'quotient') of the universal concept of existence.

In this way, expressions such as 'simplicity,' 'composition,' 'indeterminate,' 'determinate,' 'common' and 'distinct,' 'general' and 'specified,' 'absolute' and 'limited,' have appeared in the cases above, and the expression 'individuation' (tashakhkhus) mentioned in previous chapters, should be added to them.

But among these there are two pivotal concepts, the concepts of unity and multiplicity. We now turn to the explanation of these two concepts.

Types of Unity and Multiplicity

Each, specific whatness differs from the others. If two whatnesses are simple, then they will not even have a single common aspect, and likewise two compound whatnesses of two categories also will not have a common aspect. In view of the fact that a whatness may be considered by itself or along with other whatnesses, two opposite concepts may be abstracted: 'one' and 'many.'

The unity which is related to each complete whatness is called specific unity. The reiteration of its form in one or more minds does not damage its unity, for what is meant is conceptual unity, not the unity of its mental existence.

Likewise, when we consider a common essential aspect of several compound whatnesses, another sort of unity is attributed to it, called generic unity.

In contrast to these two types of unity, there is also numerical unity, which is predicated to each individual belonging to a whatness. Its criterion is the same individuation the ancient philosophers considered to be due to individuating accidents. The correct [position] is that this individuation and this unity are essential attributes of individual existence, accidentally attributed to whatness.

The individuals of a whatness which have an essential numerical multiplicity are called, ‘one by species,’ likewise the species which are of a single genus and are essentially multiple in species are called ‘one by genus.’ It is clear that these two types of unity are not true attributes of individuals and species, but are attributed to them accidentally.

It is to be concluded from this that essential whatish unity is an attribute of species and genus, and is predicated accidentally to individuals and species. To the contrary, individual unity is really an attribute of individual existence and is attributed accidentally to whatness.

On the other hand, individuals in the external world have numerically distinct existences to which multiplicity is essentially attributed. However, considering that they are of a single whatness, they are called ‘one by species,’ and various species which essentially are a multiplicity of species are called ‘one by genus’ with respect to their unity of genus.

Therefore, each existence in the external world has an individual unity. When more than one of these is taken into consideration, multiplicity is attributed to them. Each of these two attributes, which are abstracted concepts and secondary intelligibles, are abstracted, according to [the doctrine of] the fundamentality of existence, from the existence of the existents. Hence, the existence also has unity and multiplicity beyond whatish unity and multiplicity.

From this it may be guessed that various numbers, which are instances of multiplicity, are also secondary intelligibles, not primary intelligibles or whatish categories as most philosophers have held. Other reasons could also be mentioned in support of this, which shall not be presented here.

On the other hand, according to the fundamentality of whatness, whatish multiplicity is always a sign of the multiplicity of entified objective existents, for each of them by supposition refers to a specific entified aspect, although the multiplicity of existents in the external world does not always imply whatish multiplicity, as the multiplicity of individuals of a single whatness is not incompatible with the unity of their whatness.

With attention to this point, the question may be raised as to whether the multiplicity of whatnesses, in accordance with the fundamentality of existence, reveals the multiplicity of their existences or whether it is possible that several whatnesses are abstracted from one existence, at least in different stages.

In this way, other questions about existence may be raised, such as whether the existences of like complete whatnesses, especially simple whatnesses, must necessarily also be distinct, isolated and distinguished from each other, or whether it is possible that they are governed by a kind of unity specific to existence.

However, prior to beginning the discussion of this subject, an explanation is necessary about the use of the expression wahdah (unity) with respect to existence.

The Unity of the Concept of Existence

Conceptual unity and multiplicity are not limited to whatnesses, even if the terms 'unity of species' and 'unity of whatness' are specific to them. Every concept, no matter whether it is a philosophical or logical secondary intelligible, is incompatible with another concept, such that unity may be attributed to each of them, and multiplicity to the collection of them. Plurality and multiplicity in equivocal concepts and conceptual unity in univocal concepts especially have many applications.

The concept of existence, which is also considered as a philosophical secondary intelligible, is incompatible with other concepts. As was mentioned in Lesson Twenty-Two, it is a single concept which is univocal among various instances.

This concept not only is unlike compound whatnesses, which reduce to genus and difference, but because of being simple it is also devoid of any other kind of composition. On the other hand, it cannot be considered a part of any whatness, as genus or difference, for it is not a whatish concept.

It follows that although the concept of existence has neither unity of species nor unity of genus, nevertheless, as is required by univocity, conceptual unity may be attributed to it, as with other secondary intelligibles.

However, the conceptual unity of existence does not mean that it is equally and uniformly applied to all of its instances. Rather, it is a 'graduated' concept, whose predications to cases differ. In order to clarify this point, it is necessary to explain the terms 'graduated' (mushakkak) and 'uniform' (mutawati).

The Graduated and the Uniform

Universal concepts, with regard to the quality of application to instances, are divided into two groups:

Uniform concepts are those whose applications to all individuals are equal, and the individuals of which have no priority or precedence or other differences in being instances of that concept. For example, the

concept of body is equally predicated of all its instances. There is no body which in respect to its corporeality has any preference over other bodies, although each of the bodies has its own specific [properties] and some of them have advantages over the others, but with regard to the application of the concept of body, there is no difference among them.

However, graduated concepts are those whose applications to individuals, their instances, are different. Some of them have preference over others with respect to being instances of such concepts, as all lines are not the same with respect to being instances of length, and the instantiation of a line of one meter is more than the instantiation of a line of one centimeter. Or, the concept of black is not predicated equally to all its instances, some of which are blacker than others.

The concept of existence is of this sort, and the application of existence to things is not equal. There are priorities and precedences among them, as in the application of existence to God the Almighty, which has no kind of limitation and cannot be compared with its application to other existences.

There are discussions about the mystery of the differences in the applications of graduated concepts, and about whether whatish concepts are capable of being graduated in and of themselves or not, and basically, how many kinds of graduation there are.

The proponents of the fundamentality of whatness have accepted several kinds of graduation, such as amount (e.g., length) in quantities, and graduation in weakness and intensity (e.g., color) in qualities. However, proponents of the fundamentality of existence consider graduation in whatness to be accidental, and the sources of these differences are presented as differences in existence.

In addition to this, Sadr al-Muta'allihin and the followers of his transcendent theosophy call this sort of graduation 'common graduation.' They hold that there is another sort of graduation for the entified truth of existence which is called `special graduation,' a feature of which is that two instances of existence will not be independent of each other, but one will be considered as a level of the other. Some others of a gnostic disposition also mention another kind of graduation, which need not be explained.

1. This list is the same as Aristotle's (and that of Ibn Sina). Note that possession is usually called milk in Arabic; here it is jidah. Cf. Parviz Morewedge, The Metaphysica of Avicenna (ibn Sina) (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 187. For a more elaborate treatment of the Aristotelian categories in Islamic philosophy, see D. Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition (Leiden: Brill, 1988).
