

Lesson 29: Unity and Multiplicity in Entified Existence

Individual Unity

In the previous lesson there was a discussion of one kind of unity of entified realities, and that was the unity of each individual that is individuated from a whatness, that is, when the intellect considers an individual of a whatness and compares it with the whatness itself, and the difference is noted that whatness can be applied to individuals but individuals do not have this feature, 'individuality' is abstracted from the individual.

When an individual is compared with several individuals, and numerosity is not seen in a single individual, unity is abstracted from it. Hence it is said, "Existence, individuality and unity are equivalent, and whatever exists is individuated and a unit in this respect." Of course, it should be noted that what is meant by this unity is individual unity, not absolute unity, and it does not include specific unity or generic unity.

At this point the question will be raised of how the unity of an objective existent can be known. How can we be certain that an existent which we have imagined to be a 'unit' is really 'one existent' and has 'one existence'?

Philosophers often dismissively answered this question by an appeal to its clarity, but there are murky points in the environs of this question which must be explained properly.

If an existent is simple and unanalyzable, such as the sacred Divine Essence, and all immaterial things, it will naturally have a single existence. Of course, the existence of nonmaterial things and their simplicity are proved by demonstration, and only the existence of the soul and its simplicity can be consciously discovered through presentational knowledge. In general it may be said that every simple existent has a unitary existence.

However, with respect to material and analyzable existents it is not easy to prove their unity. Superficially, every existent which is continuous, and the supposed parts of which are not separated from each other, is considered to be a unitary existent having a unitary existence. But when we examine this matter closely, we are faced with two murky points.

One is whether bodies which appear to be continuous and monolithic are really so, or whether we merely imagine them to be connected due to visual errors.

Providing an answer to this question is the job of the natural sciences, and as far as we know, with the help of scientific instruments it has been proven that bodies are not really continuous and are only apparently monolithic, and they are composed of very tiny particles which are separate from each other.

From a philosophical point of view, we may say that since no body lacks extension, each of the particles of bodies, no matter how tiny, will ultimately be continuous and have unity of continuity.

The second murky and questionable point, which is more important, is whether, supposing that the continuity of the parts of a corporeal body is established, how is it to be known that there is no other sort of multiplicity in it?

It may be replied that a continuous and monolithic existent will not have actual multiplicity, however much it may be analyzable and multiple potentially, but if it is analyzed, other existents will be obtained each of which will have its own special unity.

This reply, although it may be correct for the geometrical amounts and quantities of bodies, cannot be considered a complete and comprehensive answer. For with respect to this question the point may be raised as to whether, supposing that two different bodies are brought together so that there remains no space between them and, by way of a rough example, if two pieces of metal are welded together, can they be considered to be a unitary existent having unitary existence, or must they be considered multiple, having several existences?

It is possible that an answer will be given to this question according to which since two pieces of metal possess two different whatnesses, and naturally each of them is a different individual from the other, therefore they cannot be considered to be a single existent.

However, this answer is based on the supposition that the multiplicity of whatnesses reveals a multiplicity in entified existence, while this has not been proven. In other words, the multiplicity which has been established here is really an attribute of whatness not of existence, while the discussion concerns unity and plurality of entified existence.

On the other hand, a more precise question may be posed as to how we know that a continuous existent possessing a continuous unity does not possess two superimposed existences, such that one rides upon the other and sense is not able to differentiate their duality?

To explain, just as each of our senses is able to perceive one of the features of bodies (for example, our eyes see its color, our olfactory sense smells its scent, and our gustatory sense perceives its taste) without removing the unity of the body which possesses all of these senses, in the same way, it is possible that there may be a multiplicity in bodies which our senses do not have the power to perceive.

In other words, the unity and multiplicity of sensory perceptions does not provide sufficient reason for the unity and multiplicity of entified existence. Hence, there remains the possibility that a body which itself has geometrically continuous unity possesses another multiplicity, as some philosophers have held with respect to different substantial forms, for example, an animal is known to possess several forms vertically: an elemental form, a mineral form, a vegetable form and an animal form.

The answer to this question is to be found in the ensuing lessons, and here we may say in summary form that the composition of bodies can be imagined to takes several forms:

1. Composition of quantitative parts which do not have actual existence, but which come about as a result of analysis. This kind of composition is not at all contrary to actual unity.
2. Composition of matter and form, under the supposition that the existence of matter is a potential existence. This form also does not interfere with unity, and from one view it is similar to the previous supposition.
3. Composition of matter and form, under the supposition that matter also has actual existence other than the existence of the form. Also, composition among forms are each of which is vertically above the other. According to this supposition, an existent is considered a unit because of the unity of its highest form, and is related to all of them by accident, and it would be better to call them 'unified' rather than a 'unit.'
5. Composition among several actual existents which are on one plane horizontally and none of which is a form higher than the others, even if some kind of continuity and connection exists among them, such as the composition of the parts of a clock and other machines, which is called 'mechanical composition.' Under this assumption, the composed collection cannot be considered as a 'unit' or even 'unified' from a philosophical point of view; rather it must be construed as multiple existents, and as possessing a conventional (i'tibari) unity.
6. Composition among several disjoint existents which are viewed as having a kind of unity among them, such as composition of a corps of an army of several divisions, and the composition of a division of several regiments, and the composition of a regiment of several battalions, and the composition of a battalion of several companies, and so on to a number of soldiers.

Likewise, the composition of the society is into institutions, social classes and groups, and finally the composition of these by individual human beings. From the philosophical point of view, this sort of composition is also based on convention. This sort of composition cannot be considered to have true

unity.

Two other sorts of objective composition may be added to the mentioned kinds: chemical composition and organic composition, such as the composition of living existents of several organic and chemical substances.

But from a philosophical point of view, the truth is that these compositions are not a special kind, but according to some philosophers belong to the second type, and according to other philosophers are of the third type. Perhaps the latter view is more correct, especially with regard to living existents.

In conclusion, we should recall that philosophers consider another kind of composition which includes all contingent things, and that is the composition of existence and whatness, which has been discussed. According to this terminology, simple existence is limited to the sacred Divine Essence. But this composition is analytical and mental rather than objective and entified.

It follows that unity may be attributed to material existents in several forms, some of which are true unity, like the continuous unity of [subatomic] particles, and the unity of form which has a simple existence. Some others are conventional unities, like mechanical unity and social unity.

However, regarding the composition of matter and form, if we hold that matter does not have actual existence and that every corporeal existent has but one actual existence, which is the very existence of its form, naturally it will have a real unity.

However, if we hold that matter also has an actual existence, and in other words if we hold that 'prime matter' is not to be accepted as a potential existent, then we must consider each of them to have a specific existence, and the collection of them would be called 'united' rather than a 'unit.'

Also if we believe in vertical and superimposed forms we must consider the collection of them 'plural,' and it is only because of the unity of the highest form that we can regard all of them as a unit by accident, as we regard the collection of the human spirit and body as one existent, while in reality its unity is due to the unity of the spirit.

The Unity of the World

The unity which has been established until now for each entified existent by no means negates the plurality of the collection of them. However, another unity for the whole world may be proposed which negates its plurality and multiplicity, as it is well known that philosophers consider the world as a 'unit.' However this opinion can be interpreted in several ways.

1. [The first interpretation is] the view that the unity of the world is the continuous unity of the natural world, as philosophers have proposed in discussions of natural philosophy under the heading 'the impossibility of a vacuum,' and with various explanations they have tried to prove that between two

natural existents a pure vacuum is impossible, and that in places where it is imagined that there is no existent, in reality there exist rarefied subtle bodies which are capable of being perceived by the senses. On this basis it has been argued that if two or several natural worlds are supposed, if they were connected and attached to one another they would have a continuous unity, and they would compose a single world. If among them a true vacuum were supposed, such that it would completely separate and isolate them from one another, this would refute the arguments against the existence of a vacuum.

2. [The second interpretation is] the view that it is the unity of the system of the natural world, meaning that natural existents are always effecting and being effected by one another, acting and reacting, and no natural existent can be found which neither effects other natural existents nor is effected by them. By their own activities contemporaneous existents prepare the ground for the appearance of later existents, and they themselves appear as a result of the activities of previous existents.

Therefore, the entire natural world is ruled by these relations of material cause and effect, and hence, it can be considered to have a single system. But it is clear that this unity is in reality an attribute of the system which does not have an entified existence independent of the innumerable existents of the world. On this basis, one cannot prove the true unity of the natural world.

3. [The third interpretation is] the view that unity of the world is in the shadow of the unity of a form such that all of the parts of the world are united under its umbrella, just as the parts of a plant or an animal are united under the shadow of the unity of their own substantial forms.

The single form which can be supposed for the whole world so that it also includes living existents such as man and animals, unavoidably will have another spirit which can be called the universal soul or the spirit of the world.

Some philosophers have gone even further to include nonmaterial beings and all but God, and in this way they have regarded the First Intellect or the most perfect contingent existent as a form for all that is below it.

Likewise, many of the gnostics ('urafa) have called the world the 'Cosmic Man.' However, thus far we have not encountered a proof of this matter, and particularly, to call a perfectly nonmaterial existent, such as the First Intellect, the form of the world is not devoid of loose talk.

In any case, this assumption also does not mean the negation of the real multiplicity of the parts of the world, for this unity, in reality, is an attribute of that very transcendental form of the world, and is only accidentally attributed to the whole world, as was said with regard to the unity of the spirit and the body.

It should not remain unsaid that the acceptance of this unity of the world requires acceptance of the third mentioned kind of composition, while the acceptance of that type of composition does not require the acceptance of such unity.

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