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Lesson 30: The Levels of Existence

Positions on the Unity and Plurality of Being

We know that the individual unity of every entified existent is not contrary to the real plurality of all existents. Likewise, the continuous unity of the material world is not contrary to the plurality of material existents, a plurality which is obtained in the shadow of the multiplicity of different forms. We also know that the unity of the order of the world does not mean its real unity.

However, the individual unity of the world, taken to be a living existent having a spirit, cannot be established, and on the assumption that it could be established, it would be an accidental unity. Any way, the subject of unity in the three mentioned suppositions pertains to the natural world, or at most, to the world of contingent beings. The question now is whether or not a unity can be proven for all being, including the sacred Divine Essence.

In this regard, four positions may be indicated:

1. The position of the sufis, who consider real existence to be limited to the sacred Divine Essence, and they consider all other existents to have a metaphorical existence. This position is known as 'wahdat-e wujud wa mawjud' (the unity of existence and existent). This position appears to be contrary to what is obvious and [given by] consciousness. However, it is possible to give this position some sort of interpretation, according to which it can be taken as a form of another position, the fourth position, to be mentioned below.
2. The position of Dawwani, which considers [unity] to be demanded by the 'divine temperament,' which is known as 'wahdat-e wujud wa kathrat-e mawjud' (the unity of existence and the plurality of existents). According to this position, true existence is specific to God, the Exalted, while 'true existent' also includes creatures, but in the sense of 'being related to true existence,' not in the sense of 'having true existence.'

Likewise, some [morphological] respectivals also convey this meaning, for example, tamir, which is

derived from tamr (date), which means date–seller and is related to dates, and the expression mushammas, which means something upon which the light of the sun shines, derives its meaning from shams, the sun, and the relation to the sun here is obvious.

This position is also unacceptable, for despite the fact that the words tamir and mushammas may be related to date selling and sunshine, this position implies that the expression ‘mawjud’ has two different meanings, involving a kind of ambiguity. However, there is no ambiguity with regard to wujud; so, it is also unacceptable with regard to mawjud. Moreover, the position mentioned is based on the fundamentality of whatness with regard to the Creator, which is incorrect, as became clear in Lesson Twenty–Seven.

3. The third position is related to the peripatetics, and is known as the ‘plurality of existence and of existent.’ According to this position, the plurality of existents is undeniable, and necessarily each of them will have its own specific existence, and since existence is a simple reality, so, every existence will be completely distinct (bi tamam–e dhat) from every other existence.

The following argument can be given for this position: one of these cases has to be true of existences: [i] all of them are real unitary individuals; such as individuals of a single kind, [ii] they are of various kinds of a single genus, such as the participation of various species of animals in the genus animal; [iii] none of them have any essential aspect in common, and are completely distinct. This third alternative corresponds to the third position [mentioned above] which is currently under consideration, and with the refutation of the other two alternatives, it would be established.

However, the invalidity of the second position is clear, for it implies that the reality of existence is composed of a common aspect and a distinguishing aspect that is, composed of genus and difference and it does not correspond to the simplicity of the reality of existence, and this goes back to the fact that existence is really itself that common aspect, and by the addition of something else to it, it takes various forms of species. But in the world of being, nothing can be found other than existence which could be added to it as an entified distinguishing aspect.

However, the first alternative implies that existence, like natural universals, takes the form of different individuals with the addition of individuating accidents. But the question may be repeated regarding these accidents, for they are also existents, and according to our assumption all existents possess a unitary reality, so how, on the one hand, can any difference appear between accidents and that which possesses them, and among accidents themselves, on the other hand, so that with such differences there should be different individual existents?

In other words, if it is supposed that there is something in common among entified existents, this will either be a complete sharing, meaning that existence has a specific whatness, and has multiple individuals, or it will be a partial sharing, which implies that existence has a generic whatness, and has different species.

Both assumptions are invalid. Hence there is no other option but to admit that entified existences are completely distinct. But this argument is not perfect, because the threefold alternative we assumed regarding the entified reality of existence, were taken from the principles governing whatness.

An effort was made to establish the essential distinction among existences, like the distinction among simple whatnesses, by denying that existence is composed of genus and difference, and likewise by denying that it is composed of specific nature and individuating accidents. Nevertheless, what is common among existences in the reality of existence is not a common genus or species, nor is their distinction of the sort that distinguishes simple species.

It follows that such an argument is unable to refute the co-participation of entified existences in any form other than that of having a common species or genus. It will soon become clear that another kind of unity and participation can be established for entified realities.

4. The fourth position is one which Sadr al-Muta'allihin has ascribed to the ancient Iranian sages, and is one which he himself has accepted, and has tried to explain and establish. It has become known as 'unity in plurality itself.' According to this view, entified realities of existence both have unity and commonness with one another and also have differences and distinctions.

However that which is held in common and that which distinguishes them is not of such a kind as to cause composition in entified existence or to make it analyzable into genus and difference. Their differences result from weakness and intensity, like the difference between intense light and weak light, where the weakness and intensity here is nothing other than the light. Intense light is nothing but light.

Weak light is also nothing but light. At the same time, they differ with respect to their weakness and intensity. But this difference does not interfere with the simplicity of the reality of light which is common among all of them. In other words: entified existences have graduated differences, and that which distinguishes them results from that which they have in common.

Of course, the analogy between levels of existence and levels of light is only to make it easier for the mind to understand, otherwise material light is not a simple reality (although most of the ancient philosophers imagined that it was a simple accident). On the other hand, existence has a special sort of gradualness, contrary to the gradualness of light which is a more general sort of gradualness. The difference between the two was clarified in Lesson Twenty- Eight.

However, this position may be interpreted in two ways: first, there is the difference in the level of existence between one existence and another existence, which is considered to obtain among individuals of one whatness or of several whatnesses of the same horizontal level; second, there is the difference in levels which is considered to obtain exclusively between real causes and their effects.

Since all existents are directly or indirectly the effects of God, the Exalted, it follows that the world of being is composed of an absolutely independent existence and innumerable dependent relative

existences, such that each cause is relatively independent in relation to its effect, and in this respect is more complete and possesses a higher level of existence, even if effects on the same horizontal level, which have no relations of cause and effect among each other, do not have such a gradualness, and from one point of view, they are reckoned to be completely distinct (bi tamam-e dhat).

However, the first interpretation is quite far-fetched and is unacceptable, even though it is apparently indicated in some places by Sadr al-Muta'allihin and his followers.

Let it not remain unsaid that he interpreted the words of the gnostics ('urafa') and sufi researchers to have this same meaning, and considered what they meant by 'true [or literal] existent and existence' (mawjud wa wujud-e haqiqi) to be the absolute, independent existent and existence, and he interpreted what they meant by 'figurative existent and existence' (mawjud wa wujud-e majazi) to be dependent and relative existent and existence.

The First Argument for Graduated Levels of Existence

Arguments can be given of two sorts for the graduated levels of existence, one of which corresponds to the first interpretation [mentioned above] and the other of which corresponds to the second interpretation. The first argument is that of Sadr al-Muta'allihin and his followers which has been discussed in this lesson; the second is obtained from their explanations of cause and effect.

The first argument, in reality, is about the establishment of that which is entified in common among objective realities. This may be explained as meaning that the fourth position may be divided into two cases: one is that multiplicity is attributed to objective existences and unavoidably these existences have distinctions among them; the other case is that that which distinguishes among them is not incompatible with that which is in common among them, and all of them, in their very multiplicity, are in possession of that which they have in common, which is neither inconsistent with their simplicity nor with their multiplicity.

Since the first case is self-evident and undeniable, they have directed their efforts to proving the second case.

This argument is that from all entified realities a single concept, which is that very concept of existence, may be abstracted. The abstraction of this single concept from multiple realities is reason that there is a entified [reality] in common among them which is the source of the abstraction of the single concept. If there were not any unitary aspect among objective existences such a single concept would not be abstracted.

This argument is based on two premises: one is that the concept of existence is a single univocal concept. This was proven in Lesson Twenty-Two.

The other premise is that the abstraction of a single concept from multiple things shows that there is a

single common aspect among them. The reason for this is that if a single aspect were not necessary for the abstraction of a single concept this would imply that its abstraction would be without any criterion, and then any concept could be abstracted from anything, while the invalidity of this is clear.

In this way it is to be concluded that entified existences possess something objective in common. Then another premise is added, that entified existence is simple and has a single entified aspect. It cannot be considered to be composed of two distinct aspects. So, the distinctive aspect of entified existences will not be incompatible with the common aspect of unity among them, that is, the difference among the existences will be graduated signifying the different levels of a single reality.

However, this argument appears to be controvertible, for, as was indicated in Lesson Twenty-One, the unity and multiplicity of secondary intelligibles is not a decisive reason for the unity and multiplicity of entified objective aspects; rather, it corresponds to the unity and multiplicity of viewpoints which the intellect has in abstracting these kinds of concepts.

Often the intellect abstracts numerous concepts from a single simple reality, as of the sacred Divine Essence, from which it abstracts the concepts of existence, knowledge, power and life, while no kind of multiplicity or plurality of entified aspects is conceivable for that lofty station. And how often the intellect looks at different realities from a single viewpoint and abstracts from all of them a single concept, as the concept of unity is abstracted from various objective realities.

The concepts of existence and existent are of the same sort, as is the abstraction of the concept of accident from the nine categories; and the abstraction of the whatish concepts, category and highest genus from all the ten categories, although Sadr al-Muta'allihin believed that they had nothing essentially in common among them.

Therefore, the unity of such concepts merely shows the unity of the viewpoint the intellect has in abstracting them, not the unity of the entified aspects in common among them. If there is such an aspect, it should be proved in some other way.

The Second Argument for Graduated Levels of Existence

The second argument is composed of premises which are proved in the section on cause and effect, and perhaps this has prevented it from being discussed in this context [pertaining to the grades of existence]. However, due to its importance we shall mention these premises as something given, while they will be proven in their own proper place.

The first premise is that there is a cause and effect relation among existents, and there is no existent which falls outside of the chain of causes and effects. Of course, only 'being a cause' ('illiyyah; lit., 'causehood') is attributed to the existent at the head of the chain, and only 'being an effect' (ma'luliyah; lit., 'effecthood') is attributed to the existent at the end of the chain. In any case, no existent lacks both

the relation neither of being a cause nor of being an effect to any other existent, such that it is neither a cause nor an effect of something.

The second premise is that the entified existence of an effect is not independent of the existence of its creating cause. It is not true that each of them possesses an independent existence, and that they are joined by means of a relation external to their existences; rather, the existence of an effect has no sort of independence whatsoever from its creating cause. In other words, it is the very relation and dependence on its cause, not something independent which has a relation with its cause, as is observed in the relation between an act of will and the soul.

This topic is the noblest of all philosophical topics, and it has been established by the late Sadr al-Muta'allihin. By means of it he has opened a way to the solution of many philosophical perplexities. Truly, it must be considered one of the most eminent and exquisite fruits of Islamic philosophy.

From the addition of these two premises the conclusion is obtained that the existence of all effects in relation to their creating cause, and ultimately to the sacred divine Being, which is the source of emanation of all existences other than Itself, is that very dependence. All creatures are in reality manifestations of the Divine existence.

In accordance with their own levels they possess intensity and weaknesses, priority and posteriority, and some of them are relatively independent of others; but absolute independence is reserved for the sacred Divine Essence.

Thus, the whole of being is composed of a chain of entified existences, in which the 'strength' (qiwam) of each link, with regard to its level of existence in relation to it, is more limited and weaker than that of the link above.

This same weakness and limitation is the criterion for being an effect. [The chain continues upward] until it reaches the source of being which is of unlimited intensity of existence and which encompasses all the levels of contingency, and sustains the existence of all of them. There is no existent which is independent and without need of It in any aspect or facet, but rather they are all poor, needy and dependent on Him.

By this existential relation is meant a special sort of unity which negates the independence of every existent except the Holy Divine Existence, and the concept of which only applies to entified existence and is naturally based upon the fundamentality of existence.

When one considers independent being, it will have no other instance than the infinite Divine Being. For this reason independent being must be considered unitary, and this is a unity which is not susceptible to multiplicity. For this reason it is called 'true unity' (wahdat-e haqqah).

When one turns one's attention to the levels of existence and its manifestations, multiplicity is attributed

to them; however, at the same time a kind of unity must be admitted among them. For since the effect is not the cause, it cannot be considered a second to it, but rather must be considered as being sustained by the cause, and an aspect from among the aspects of the cause and a manifestation among its manifestations.

By their 'union' (ittihad) is meant that in the context of its own being, one has no independence in relation to the other, although the expression 'union' (ittihad) is vague and inadequate, and the proper meaning of it is not commonly discerned, and this leads to misunderstandings.

It is obvious without further comment that this exposition does not negate the multiplicity of existences at the same level in some links of the chain, such as the natural universe, and this does not require that individuals of one or several whatnesses of the same degree differ in their grades [of being]; rather the differences among them are to be considered distinctions with the entirety of their simple existences.

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