

[Home](#) > [Philosophical Instructions](#) > [Part 5: The Material And The Immaterial](#) > [Lesson 41: The Material and the Immaterial](#) > Characteristics of Corporeal and Immaterial Beings

Lesson 41: The Material and the Immaterial

Introduction

Philosophers have propounded preliminary divisions for all existents, among which is the distinction between necessary existence and contingent existence. Considering the fact that this distinction is made with regard to the relation between whatness and existence (necessity and contingency are obtained from the ‘matter’ of the proposition in the form of a ‘simple question’ [e.g., of the form ‘x exists’]), it is more compatible with the doctrine of the fundamentality of whatness.

On the basis of the fundamentality of existence, all existence may be divided into the independent and the relational (rabit), or the self-sufficient (ghani, literally rich) and the poor (faqir). That is, if an existent has absolutely no need of another and, in technical terms, is an ‘existent by itself’ (mawjud bi nafsih), it is self-sufficient and independent, and otherwise it is poor and relational.

It is clear that what is meant by self-sufficiency and independence are absolute self-sufficiency and absolute independence; otherwise, every cause possesses a relative self-sufficiency and independence in relation to its own effect.

It is self-evident that there are poor and relational existents, or contingent existence, which are concomitant with being effects, but that there is a self-sufficient and absolutely independent existent or a Necessary Existence in Itself (bi al-dhat) which is concomitant with the First Cause is established by proof, a proof which was indicated in the discussions on cause and effect, and in the discussions of theology there will be further explanation of this.

Likewise, philosophers have divided the whatnesses of contingent existents into two groups: substance and accident. They have called a whatness that is not in need of a subject in order to become an existent a ‘substance,’ and that which needs a subject, or in other words, a state or attribute for another existent, is called an ‘accident.’

It was previously indicated that it is well known among philosophers that accidental whatnesses,

according to induction, possess nine higher genera, and with the addition of substance, this makes ten categories. It seems that the concepts of substance and accident are secondary philosophical intelligibles which are obtained by comparing existents with each other.

For example, when one compares the existence of the states of one's soul (not their whatnesses) with the existence of the soul (not with its whatness) he sees that the occurrence of passive qualities, such as fear, hope, happiness and sadness, etc., depends on the existence of the soul, so that on the assumption of the absence of the existence of the soul, no room remains for their existence.

This is opposed to the existence of the soul, which does not need them and can also occur without them. In view of this comparison, existents are divided into two groups. The first group is called 'accident' and the second group is called 'substance.'

If one equates the concept of substance with 'non-accident,' one can divide all existents into substances and accidents so that the Necessary Existent, Blessed and Exalted, may also be considered an instance of substance, as with some Western philosophers. In this way the above-mentioned division will be a primary division. But Islamic philosophers divide contingent existence into substance and accident. For this reason they do not consider the application of substance to the Necessary Existent in Itself to be correct.

On the other hand, some Western philosophers have expressed some doubts about the existence of substance. For example, Berkeley denied the existence of corporeal substance, and Hume had doubts about the substance of the soul, as well. However, those who accept the existence of objective accidents and have denied the existence of their substances have unwittingly accepted the existence of many sorts of substance in place of one sort of substance. For example, in case the phenomena of the soul are not considered accidents of the soul, they will not need any subject, and in this case each of them will be a particular substance.

Likewise, if the attributes of bodies are not considered accidents in need of a subject, inevitably they themselves will become corporeal substances. For what is meant by being a substance is nothing more than that the existence of a contingent existence does not need a subject.

Along with these divisions one can consider another general and primary division for all existents, and that is the division between the immaterial (mujarrad) and the material; that is, entified existence is either corporeal and possessing corporeal attributes, in which case it is called material, or it is not of this class and is called 'immaterial.'

This classification is not specific to contingent existence, for one of its classes, the immaterial, includes the Necessary Existent. Likewise, it is not specific to substance or accident, for both the immaterial and the material can be substance or accident. For example, souls and completely immaterial things are non-material substances, and bodies are in the class of material substances, and qualities of the soul are immaterial accidents while sensible qualities are material accidents.

In this Part, we are considering this very classification, and after explaining the concepts of its categories we will state their general characteristics, and then we will set out to explain their sub-categories and the principles of these. In addition, we will also take up the discussion of substance and accident.

The Meaning of ‘Immaterial’ and ‘Material’

The term mujarrad (immaterial) is the passive participle of tajrid meaning ‘to be stripped,’ and this meaning brings to mind the idea that something which has clothing or a skin is peeled and made naked. But in philosophical terminology this term is used as the opposite of ‘material,’ and what is meant is an existent which does not have the characteristics of material things, and there is no intention here to indicate that something was previously material and that it was stripped of this state or of anything else and it actually means ‘immaterial.’

Hence, in order to understand its exact meaning, the meaning of the term ‘material’ must first be clarified. Considering that this term is related to ‘matter’ (maddah), we must explain the meaning of the term ‘matter.’

The meaning of maddah (matter) is etymologically ‘helper’ (madad konandeh) and ‘extender’ (imtidad dehandeh), and as a scientific term is employed in several senses.

1. Logicians call the quality of the relation between the subjects and predicate of a proposition with regard to reality (necessity, contingency, impossibility) the ‘matter’ [mode] of the proposition.
2. Also, the propositions which constitute a syllogism, disregarding their form and structure, are called the matter of the syllogism.
3. In physics ‘matter’ is used for an existent which possesses specific attributes such as mass, attraction and repulsion, friction, etc., and it is used as the opposite of ‘force’ or ‘energy.’
4. In philosophy, ‘matter’ is used for an existent which is the ground for the appearance of another existent, as soil is the ground for the appearance of plants and animals. Hence, the philosophical meaning of this term comprises the meaning of relation, and it is close to the meaning of ‘mayeh’ (stuff) in Farsi.

Philosophers call the first stuff of all corporeal existents ‘the matter of matters’ or ‘hayula ula’ (prime matter),¹ and there are differences of opinion about its reality. Aristotelians hold that prime matter has no actuality of its own, and its reality is nothing more than potentiality and capacity for corporeal actualities. A discussion of this will come later.

In conclusion, the term ‘material’ in the terminology of philosophy is used for things related to the matter of the cosmos, and for them to be existents requires a prior matter or stuff, and sometimes it is used in a general sense which includes matter itself. With regard to usage, it is approximately equivalent to

corporeal (jismani). The word mujarrad means immaterial and incorporeal, that is, a thing that is neither a body nor an attribute or characteristic of a body.

Characteristics of Corporeal and Immaterial Beings

Body is defined in various ways, the most famous of which are the following:

1. Body is a substance possessing three dimensions (length, width and depth). More precisely, it may be said that it is a substance in which three intersecting lines may be supposed such that the angles formed by the intersection of the three lines are right angles. The expression 'supposed' is added in order to include things like the sphere, for although there are actually no such lines in the sphere, such lines can be supposed in it, as one can bring about such lines by cutting the sphere.
2. It is narrated that the theologians (mutakallimin) defined body as a substance which occupies space, in technical terms shaghil hayyiz (occupier of a domain).
3. In defining it, Shaykh al-Ishraq (Suhrawardi) says: It is a substance which can be the object of sensible ostension.

There have been discussions about these definitions and whether any of them is a logically complete definition (hadd tam mantiqi), but it is not necessary to mention them.

In any case, the clearest characteristic of body is its extension in three dimensions, and this characteristic has various implications, including that bodies are, mentally, infinitely divisible in three directions. Another is that bodies have locations, but not in the sense of spaces independent of bodies by which they are filled, but in the sense that will be explained in the discussion of location.

Third is that such existents are naturally capable of being objects of sensible ostension, for sensible ostension is performed with regard to location, and whatever has a location can be the object of sensible ostension. Finally, corporeal existents possess a fourth dimension which is called 'time,' and the discussion of the reality of time will also be forthcoming.

Corporeality and materiality, in the specific meaning which does not include body and matter themselves, are subordinate to the existence of bodies. In other words, they are things which do not occur independently of bodies. Their most important characteristic is that they, as subjects to body, are divisible.

Therefore, the soul belonging to the body, which in one sense is united with it, is not corporeal, for even though it is subject to the body it is not divisible. On the contrary, attributes and accidents of bodies such as color and shape, which are subject to the body, are divisible. Hence, they are considered corporeal things.

With regard to the characteristics of bodies and corporeality, their opposites can be delineated as the characteristics of immaterial things; that is, immaterial entities cannot be divided, and they have no location in space or time. There is only one sort of immaterial entity to which a spatial or temporal location may be related by accident, and that is the spirit belonging to a body. That is, one can say: the spirit is in the place where the body is, and the time that the body is existent is the same time when its spirit is existent.

However, this possession of a location and possession of a time are really attributes of the body, and as a result of the association and union of the spirit with the body, loosely speaking and metaphorically one also may relate these to the spirit.

It is to be noted that the gnostics ('urafa) and Illuminationist philosophers also proved that there is a third kind of existent which is an intermediary and barzakh² between perfectly immaterial entities and purely material ones. They are called imaginal existents,³ and in the terminology of Sadr al-Muta'allihin and his followers, they are called imaginal and barzakhī immaterial entities, and likewise the term 'imaginal bodies' is sometimes applied to them. Further explanation of this will be given.

¹. The Arabic hayula is derived from the Greek term for matter, hyle. [Tr.]

². In Islamic eschatology, the barzakh, literally isthmus is the phase between death and resurrection. The term is also used for the imaginal world that stands as an isthmus between the physical and the transcendent domains. [Tr.]

³. The term mithal is also used for the Platonic Ideals or Forms. Suhrawardi uses the same term, which literally means 'example' or 'similitude', for that which is seen in visions or dreams. [Tr.]

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