

## Lesson 42: What is Location?

### Introduction

The discussion of time and space is among the most important problems of philosophy which has always attracted the attention of thinkers and philosophers, and it has always retained its freshness and vivacity, and has never become stale or faded. It has not yet been filed away.

Although geniuses in Eastern and Western philosophy have thought and spoken at length about time and space, and among them the great Eastern philosopher, Ibn Sina has spilled much ink over the details of this subject in the Physics of his *Shifa*, yet there remains room for profound thinking, research and inquiries in its interstices.

The opinions of philosophers and authorities concerning time and space are so opposed and contrary to one another and include weird ideas to such an extent that few philosophical problems can be compared to it.

For example, on the one hand, time and space are considered to be immaterial substances; while on the other hand, they have been degraded to such an extent that they are considered illusory and imaginary. Kant, the famous German philosopher, considered them to be mental, or in his own terms 'forms of sensibilities.' Most philosophers, however, have considered them to be objective accidents.

In this regard, the great Islamic philosopher, Sadr al-Muta'allihin Shirazi has won the race against all of them and has presented a very important and firm view which can be considered the last word on the subject. This view may also be considered a basis for establishing substantial motion, the philosophical explanation of which at the very least is one of the major original innovations of this great philosopher, as will be made clear in future chapters.

In view of the fact that in the previous lesson the occupation of space and time has been discussed as properties of material things, we have seen fit here to present an explanation pertaining to space and time.

## The Problem of Space and Time

In all languages there are expressions for space and time, and all people believe that material things are related to space and time, which relations can be stated in various ways: “The sun is in the sky,” “The sea is where fish live,” “The book is on the table,” and so forth. Likewise, it is said: “The honorable Prophet of Islam, may the Peace and Blessings of Allah be with him and with his progeny, was born in the sixth century. During his time, wars took place between Muslims and infidels.” “Yesterday, school was closed,” and so on.

In general, the common understanding is that all bodies occupy space. Rather, most people generalize this judgment and imagine that there is no existent without a place, as the simple minded imagine that God the Almighty also has a place in the heavens or beyond them, which, of course, is not correct, and this will be discussed further at the appropriate place. The very same line of thought is also applied to time and its relations to things and phenomena.

Naturally, the philosopher who would know and make known the realities of things also must answer this question: “What is the reality of space and time?”, especially since one encounters these concepts in many of the problems of philosophy, such as in the previous lesson where space and time were introduced as properties of material things, and in the discussions of theology we deny that God the Exalted occupies space or time.

The first difficulty which exists with regard to the explanation of the reality of space and time, and turns this explanation into a formidable problem, is that space and time cannot be experienced by the senses and they never fall into the traps of our sensory organs. They are not seen by the eye, nor touched, nor are they perceived by any other sense, although sensible things are related to them such that they are considered to be of the sensible material world.

It is because of precisely this aspect that Kant presented them as mental channels for knowledge of entified phenomena, and not as objective entified things themselves; and another group of thinkers considered them to be illusory and imaginary. On the other hand, a group of philosophers who could not deny their objective existence, and who also could not believe them to be material existents, held that they are immaterial things.

Finally, most philosophers have considered them to be material accidents whose existences are established through the joint effort of the senses and reason. Naturally, each group advanced a reason or reasons for its own view, and criticized the reasons of the others. Sadr al-Muta'allihin affirms the view about space which is attributed to Plato, that is, space is immaterial, although there is room for doubt about the veracity of this attribution to Plato and it needs to be researched further.

It is obvious that this work is no place for a review of all the positions and a criticism of all the relevant reasons. Therefore, we will confine ourselves to a mention of the most famous positions, and an

explanation of the view we affirm.

## The Difference between 'Space' and 'Spatial Location' and between 'Time' and 'Temporal Location'

Before discussing the reality of place and time, it is necessary to bear in mind this point, that philosophers differentiate between space or place (makan) and spatial location or where ('ayn), and likewise between the concepts of time (zaman) and temporal location or when (mata). The concepts of whereness and whenness are considered to be relative, obtained by relating a thing to a place and time.

In the Aristotelian table of categories they are placed among the seven relative accidental categories, although it seems that basically these kinds of concepts must not be considered whatish concepts or categories. The reason for this becomes clear with regard to the characteristics of the kinds of concepts explained in Lesson Fifteen.

In any case, the Aristotelians believed that both the concept of where and when are independent whatish concepts and specific categories and have no relation to the whatness of time and space. Others have also had no doubt that though these kinds of concepts are brought about in relation to time and space, they are different from the concepts of space and time.

For this reason, one should be careful not to confuse discussions about space and time with those about these relational concepts.

## The Reality of Space

Regarding the whatness of space, a few positions have been reported which are quite weak and not worth discussing, and no famous philosophers has held them. For example, there is the position that space consists of the prime matter of bodies or their forms or actualities, or that it is an independent corporeal area in which the cosmos is contained.

Among the positions, two are quite famous: one, which is attributed to Plato, has been affirmed by some Islamic sages, such as Sadr al-Muta'allihin; while the other is attributed to Aristotle, and it has been accepted by the majority of Islamic sages, including Farabi and Ibn Sina. The view attributed to Plato is that, space is a substantival immaterial dimension which is identical to the volume of the cosmos.

This position seems strange because an immaterial existent, even if an imaginal form which is barzakhi, has no relation to material existents, and cannot be considered a locus for them. However, there is a strong possibility that a mistake has been made in the narration or translation of this position, or that what is meant here by the term immaterial (mujarrad) is not the technical sense.

This view is supported by the fact that Mir Damad has denied that Plato held this position.<sup>1</sup> According to

this conjecture, one may interpret the position to claim that space is the volume of the cosmos considered separately from it (and in this sense is 'abstracted' from the cosmos).

As for the view reported to have been held by Aristotle, it is held that space is the inner surface of a body which makes contact with the outer surface of another body, like the inner surface of a glass which makes contact with the outer surface of the water contained in it.

There is a difficulty with this position. If we suppose that a fish is standing in a flowing river, without a doubt, the surface of water in contact with the surface of its body is always changing, and so, according to the position mentioned above, we must say that its space is constantly changing, although we assumed that it was standing still in its own place and that there has been no change in its space.

Another precise point which must be taken into consideration is that the above-mentioned definition is composed of two basic concepts. One is the inner surface of a containing body, and the other is contact with the outer surface of the contained body. However, 'surface' is a kind of amount and thus belongs to the category of quantity, while contact, according to the Aristotelians, is of the category of relation, and by combining these two categories a third category cannot be brought about.

In addition, contact is an accidental state for the mentioned surface, and for this reason cannot be the difference by which its essence is defined. In this way, it would have to be considered a special kind of category of continuous quantity. In any case, the question of the category to which space belongs remains unanswered.

It seems that the concept of space is not a non-relational concept (mafahim-e nafsi) such as man, animal, color and shape, but rather it is an accidental concept which includes a sense of relation to a thing which has a space. In order to obtain this concept, two things must be compared to each other from a specific point of view so that one may be considered the space of the other. This shows that space is not a kind of whatish concept included in the categories, but rather is a respectival concept.

Secondly, in order to consider something as the space of another it is not necessary to take into account its particular whatness or substance. For example, when we consider a glass as the space of some water, it is not because its body is made of crystal, and when we call water the space of a fish, it is not because it is a liquid composed of oxygen and hydrogen, but because it has the capacity to contain a thing which has a space, and that which in reality is taken into account is its being a container, not its substance.

Regarding these two points, one may say that when some of the volume of the cosmos is considered separately, and it is compared with a body contained in it, the mentioned volume will be its space.

It must be noted that sometimes space is applied to a quantity of volume which is greater than the capacity of the thing related to it, as when a house or a city is said to be the space of a person. Giving heed to this point, philosophers have said that these are not 'true spaces.' It is to be concluded that the

true space of every thing is the amount of volume of the cosmos which is equivalent to the volume of the body related to a space insofar as it contains it.

Among the conclusions obtained from this philosophical analysis is that space is subordinate to the cosmos, and space does not exist prior to the appearance of or with the annihilation of the latter. Hence, one cannot consider the volume and surface of a thing to be independent existents which must have been created independently.

Rather, basically such concepts as volume and surface are representatives of aspects of corporeal existence which the mind separates from bodies. For this reason one can consider these kinds of cases, which are accidents, as aspects of the existence of material substances. Careful study of this subject makes clear why space is specific to bodies and may be considered a property of material existents, for the source of their abstraction is nothing but the volume of bodies.

1. Cf., Qabasat, p. 164.

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