

Lesson 45: Continuation of the Discussion of the Kinds of Substance

Intellectual Substance

The ancient philosophers took quite tortuous routes to establish the existence of intellectual substance. For example, they all resorted to the ‘principle of the unit’ (i.e., the unity of the effect given the unity of its direct cause) in order to prove the existence of the first intellect which is the most simple and most perfect of the contingent existents.

On the other hand, they introduced the active intellect as the proximate agent of the elemental world (i.e., the sublunary world), and they also presented it as that which emanates the intellectual concepts to man and to his treasury of intelligibles, and they mentioned various different ways to prove its existence.

Also, to prove the existence of the tenfold vertical intellect they sought the assistance of the hypothesis of nine celestial spheres. They imagined that the nine intellects were to be obtained as the proximate causes for the nine celestial spheres, and they also imagined these intellects to be the ends of the motions subject to the volitions of the souls of the spheres. These nine intellects together with the active intellect were taken to compose the ten intellects.

Likewise, the philosophers, in order for to establish the existence of the world of the intellects, and especially the Illuminationists (Ishraqiyyin), in order to establish the existence of the horizontal intellects (i.e., the Platonic Forms), relied upon the ‘Doctrine of the Nobler Contingent’ and they formulated various reasons for the validity of this doctrine. But, this is not the occasion for a review and criticism of their explanations and arguments.

However, by focusing on the fundamentality of existence, the graduated levels of existence and the reality of the causal relation, which are established in the philosophy of Sadr al-Muta’allihin, there emerges a simpler and at the same time more certain way to prove that there is a world of intellects which can be considered to be a new explanation of the doctrine of the nobler contingent.

Hence, first we will explain something about the above-mentioned doctrine, and then we shall describe the conclusions for the present discussion which may be drawn from it.

The Doctrine of the Nobler Contingent

The purport of this doctrine is that if we consider two contingent existents, one of which is nobler than the other, the nobler one must occur at a level prior to that of the less noble one, and the nobler must be the cause of the less noble. So, if the nobler is not known to us, we can discover it by means of the existence of the less noble.

The way this doctrine is used in the present discussion is as follows: intellectual substance is nobler than other substances, so, according to this doctrine, it must occur at a level prior to that of the others, so that there will be a means for their existences. Hence, the existence of other substances is a means to discover the existence of that which is at a prior level to them.

This doctrine came to be especially favored since the time of Shaykh al- Ishraq, and the following proof was used to establish it.

If the nobler existent does not exist at a prior level to the less noble, then it must be at the same level, a lower level, or not existing at all. If it existed at the same level—as, for example, if intellectual substance together with corporeal substance were produced by the first cause—then the ‘principle of the unit’ would be violated.

If the nobler existed at a posterior level—as, for example, if intellectual substance came into existence after corporeal substance, and corporeal substance were a means for the production of intellectual substance— this would imply that the existence of the cause were baser than the existence of its effect.

If it never came into existence at all, this would mean that something which has the capability to cause the nobler has no existence, that is, that the first cause would also lack the capability to create it! So, the only correct assumption is that the nobler existent exists at a level prior to the less noble and is a means for its production.

Later, this argument, which rests on the doctrine of the unit, was challenged and criticized by some, and defended by others, such as Mir Damad who offered other arguments in its defense, as well, the review of which is not appropriate here.

As we indicated, however, this doctrine may be more firmly established on the basis of the principles of the philosophy of Sadr al-Muta’allihin, as follows.

The causal relation between a cause and its effect is an essential and unalterable relation; that is, the existence of the effect is essentially dependent on the existence of the efficient cause, and it is impossible that the positions of cause and effect should be changed so that the existence of the cause

should be dependent on the existence of the effect.

So, it is impossible that an effect should be produced by something on which it is not dependent. The causal relation is also a necessary relation, and it is impossible for the existential dependency of the effect on the cause to vanish, so that the effect could occur without the cause. Hence, the possibility of being an effect is equal to its necessity.

In other words, the causal relation between two existents can never be considered to be merely possible (*imkan khass*, the negation of the necessity of the terms of the relation), so that it is possible for one of the two existents both to be and not to be an effect of the other with neither of them being necessary. So, if it is not impossible for one thing to be the effect of another, it will be necessary for it to be the effect of the other, and without the other it would not come into existence.

On the other hand, in the discussions of cause and effect it was established that the criterion for being an effect is weakness of existence. Therefore, this supposition will be necessary wherever a more perfect and more powerful existent can be supposed, so that the weaker existent may be considered to radiate from its existence, not being independent of it.

By attending to these two premises, the above-mentioned doctrine may be obtained as follows: If we suppose that there are a number of existents each of which is more powerful than another, so that the former may be considered the cause of the existence of the latter; in other words, if a special gradation is posited among them, then each of the more powerful existents will be at a prior level to the weaker existents, and necessarily will be the cause in relation to them, until one arrives at an existent for which it is impossible to suppose a more perfect one, and which cannot possibly be the effect of any of the other existents.

According to this doctrine, the existence of intellectual substance, which is more perfect than other substances and can be the cause for their existences, is established. This will be an intermediary between the level of infinite intensity of existence (i.e. God, the Exalted) and the lower levels of existence.

On this basis, the existence of horizontal intellects may also be established, that is, one can suppose a number of intellectual substances none of which is the cause of another of them, but each of which is the cause for a species of lower existents and merely possesses the perfection of that very species in a more perfect and simpler form.

Several points must be observed: one is that horizontal intellects will be the effects of one or several intellects more perfect than they, for an intellect may be supposed which possesses the perfections of all of them, and which stands in the chain of their causes. Earlier it was mentioned that the possibility of being a cause is equal to its necessity.

The second point is that none of the horizontal intellects will have a whatness common with the species

of existent from which it is produced, for the abstraction of a whatness of a single species from different levels of existence is impossible. Even two intellectual substances which are taken to be vertically related so that one is the cause of the other will not have a single whatness.

The third point is that this doctrine is not capable of establishing the number of intellects, and there is no way to prove how many intermediaries exist between the first intellect and the horizontal intellects. Since the hypothesis of there being ten intellects is based on the hypothesis of there being nine celestial spheres, with the invalidity of the latter, the former also becomes invalid.

Imaginal Substance

As was mentioned in the previous lesson, the Illuminationists proved the existence of another world called the world of 'immaterial phantoms' (ashbah mujarradah) or of 'suspended forms' (suwar mu'allaqah), which is an intermediary between the intellectual world and the corporeal world, and in this regard, in the language of the later philosophers this was called the world of the isthmus (barzakh), or the imaginal world (alam-e mithal).

Probably the Illuminationists either were inspired to use this term by the mystics ('urafa), or they themselves found it through mystical disclosures. In religious texts some topics may be found, especially about the world of the isthmus and the questions of Nakir and Munkar¹ and the like which can be explained by means of the imaginal world.

It is necessary to note that Shaykh al-Ishraq does not use the term 'isthmus' (barzakh) for the imaginal world of forms, but applies this term to the material world. It is also to be mentioned that the expression mithal [image or form] is used for this world in a sense different from the Platonic Forms, for the latter are completely immaterial and a kind of intellectual substance, while imaginal substances are another kind of existent unlike intellectual substances, which are completely lacking in corporeal attributes and limits, and are unlike corporeal substances, which are divisible and possess location.

Rather, they are of the kind of imaginal forms which are drawn in the minds of men. For example, in order to halve them in the imagination, one must bring into existence two smaller forms in the mind, not that a larger form is to be divided into two halves.

Likewise, it must be kept in mind that expressions such as 'phantoms' regarding this world are not used in the sense that the entities of this world are faint forms of corporeal existents nor that they are weaker in the level of their existence than bodies. Rather, this expression shows that there exist fixed and unchangeable forms in that world, which are not only no less weak than material entities, but are considered to be more powerful than them.

Shaykh al-Ishraq considered the forms which are seen in a mirror to be sorts of abstract phantoms, and he also related genies and the forms which are seen in dreams to this world. Furthermore, he held that

sensory perception is also the observation of imaginal forms which exist in this world.

However, Sadr al-Muta'allihin held that sensory perception is related to the imaginal plane of the soul, as will be explained in the appropriate place. As for the forms which are seen in a mirror, they are brought into existence by the reflection of light, and have no relation to the imaginal world.

Likewise, according to the exoteric meaning of the Qur'an and sunnah, the genies are subtle corporeal existents, which in the words of the Noble Qur'an are created of 'fire,' and have corporeal characteristics, and are even like man in having responsibilities, rewards and punishments, although because of their subtlety, ordinary people cannot sense them.

In any case, the existence of immaterial phantoms is undeniable, and in the sacred traditions one comes across expressions like 'phantoms' (ashbah) and 'shadows' (adhlal), which are comparable to immaterial phantoms. There are few people who have taken a few steps down the road of spiritual wayfaring who have not observed these sorts of existents. However, it is not very easy to establish their existence by means of rational proof.

Some philosophers have attempted to prove the existence of this world by employing the doctrine of the nobler contingent, while Sadr al-Muta'allihin took advantage of another doctrine, which he himself founded, called the doctrine of the baser contingent (imkan-e akhass).

However, the difficulty here is that one cannot definitively prove that there is a specific gradation from intellectual substance to imaginal substance to corporeal substance so that one may consider the corporeal world to radiate from the imaginal world and the latter to be an intermediary for the creation of the material world.

At the most one may say that immaterial substance may be considered as the source for the sensory and imaginary forms which occur in the souls of men, that is, the immaterial substances may emanate these forms while they lack intellectual levels. In this way, on the basis of the Doctrine of the Nobler Contingent, their existence is established.

It may be concluded that the most plausible way to establish the existence of imaginal substance is through mystical disclosures and the words of the Infallibles, Peace and salutations to all of them.

At the end of these discussions it is to be noted that the division of existence into the material and immaterial is a rational division which is comprehensive and exclusive; however, the confinement of the immaterial worlds to the intellectual, psychic, and imaginal is not a rational comprehensive and exclusive division. The addition of the imaginal world of the Illuminationists to the other worlds shows that it is not irrational to suppose that one or more other worlds exist of whose characteristics we are unaware.

¹ Nakir and Munkar are the names of the two angels who interrogate a person immediately following his death and burial about his religious beliefs. [Tr.]

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