

Lesson 47: Accidents

Views of Philosophers about Accidents

As was previously indicated, it is well known among philosophers that substance is a highest genus, and it is a specific category which has various species. However, accident is not a specific category, but is a general concept abstracted from nine categories, and the predication of it to each of them is accidental, not essential.

In contrast to this position, three other positions may be indicated. One is the position of Mir Damad who considered accident, like substance, to be a category and a highest genus, and those which others take to be accidental categories; he considered to be species of accidents.

Another position is that the categories are: substance, quantity, quality, and relation, and other accidental categories, according to this position, are considered to be kinds of relations. Finally, the position of Shaykh al-Ishraq (Suhrawardi) is that the categories consist of the four mentioned above in addition to motion.¹

It seems that, first of all, substance and accident are types of secondary philosophical intelligibles, none of which can be considered a highest genus and whatish category. Secondly, as has been proclaimed by Sadr al-Muta'allihin, motion is an ontological concept and is neither itself a category, nor is it included in any whatish category.

Thirdly, many things which are called objective accidents and are taken to be categories or types of categories (including all of the seven relational categories) are abstracted concepts, and none of them are objective accidents to be considered as independent whatish categories or types of categories.

It is clear that the presentation, criticism, and review of all of these positions require more detailed discussion which is not very useful. For this reason a short discussion will suffice for this topic.

Quantity

The category of quantity may be defined in this way: it is an accident which is essentially capable of being divided; and the modifier 'essentially' is used in order to exclude from the definition divisions of other categories, because their divisions are obtained subordinate to the divisions of quantity.

Quantity may be generally divided into two kinds: continuous (i. e., geometrical quantity) and discrete (i. e., number), each of which includes different kinds which are discussed in the two sciences of geometry and arithmetic.

It should be noted that the philosophers consider the first number to be two, which is divisible into two units. One is considered to be the source of the numbers, although it is not held to be a kind of number. It seems that it can easily be accepted that number is not a whatish concept, and that in the external world there is nothing by the name of 'number' but only things which have the attributes of being unities or pluralities (numbered).

For example, when an individual person is located somewhere, nothing is brought into existence called unity over and above his own existence. However, attending to the fact that there is no one beside him, the concept of unit will be abstracted from him. Likewise, when another individual is located beside him, the second individual is also a unit, but we consider them together and relate the concept of two to them, although there is no objective accident between them by the name of the number two.

By the way, how can a single accident (the number two) subsist in two subjects?! (Take note.) And also, when a third individual sits beside the other two, the number three is abstracted from the set of them. However it is not the case that an entified accident called two has been destroyed and that another one called three has been brought into existence. In this very same situation we can consider the first two individuals and relate the number two to them, as we can consider one of them along with the newly entered individual and call them two persons.

Further evidence that the concept of number is respectival (i'tibari) is that it is an accident of the numbers themselves, their fractions, and sets, and if number were something entified, an infinite number would occur in limited subjects.

Likewise, number is equally related to immaterial and material things, to the real and to the fictitious. Are we to consider number to be an immaterial accident when related to immaterial things and a material accident when related to material things?! Are we to consider number to be real when it is related to real things, and consider it respectival when the same number is predicated to a respectival thing? Or are we to allow that something respectival have a real entified attribute and accident?

Regarding continuous quantities, as was made clear in the discussions of time and space, they are aspects of the existence of bodies, and they have no existence apart from the existence of bodies. In

technical terms, composite making (ja'ī ta'līfī) and independent creation do not apply to them, even if the mind is able to consider them as independent whatnesses.

Considering this point, there is a sense in which they can be taken to be accidents of bodies, but accidents whose existence is the very existence of the body, and all of their whatnesses exist by one existence. In other words, the existence of these kinds of accidents is an aspect of the existence of substances.

Relational Categories

Among the ten categories, there are seven each of which is regarded as possessing some kind of relation, and for this reason they are called the relational categories and some philosophers have taken them to be species of the category of relation (nisbah or idhafah). The relational categories are as follows:

1. The category of relation (idhafah), which is obtained from the occurrence of a relation between two existents, and is divided into those which have similar terms, and those which have opposite terms. The former kind is like the relation 'being the brother of' which holds between two brothers, or the relation of simultaneity between two things which exist at one time. The latter kind is like the relation of a father to his child, or the relation of priority and posteriority between two parts of time, or two phenomena which come into existence at two times.
2. The category of where ('ayn), which is obtained from the relation between a material thing and its location.
3. The category of when (mata), which is obtained from the relation between a material existent and its time.
4. The category of position (wadh'), which is obtained from the relation among the parts of a thing to each other, considering their directions, such as the condition of standing, a posture in which the parts of the body are located over one another so that the head is on top, or the condition of reclining, which is abstracted from the location of the parts of the body next to one another in a horizontal form.
5. The category of possession (jidah or milk), which is obtained from the relation of one thing to another which more or less encompasses it, like the condition of the body being covered by its clothes, or the head being covered by a hat.
6. The category of activity (an yaf'al), which describes the gradual influence of a material agent on the matter acted upon, such as the sun which gradually warms water.
7. The category of passivity (an yanfa'il), which describes passive matter which is gradually affected by a material agent, such as water which is gradually warmed by the sun.

It should be noted that all of these categories, except for that of relation, are specific to material things, since they possess time and place, and the relations between parts and considerations of direction are conceivable only for bodies. Likewise, the encompassing of clothing and the like is also peculiar to material existents. Also, gradual affecting and being affected by occur only among material things.

However, the category of relation is common between material and immaterial things. Examples of it can be found among material things, such as the relation of above and below between two stories of a building and relation can be found to hold between immaterial things, such as the divine eternal priority (taqaddum sarmadi) to other immaterial things, and the temporal simultaneity among the intellects.

Likewise, one can consider one term of a relation to be an immaterial existent and the other term to be a material existent, such as the ontological priority of an immaterial cause to its material effect.

It seems that none of these are primary intelligible whatish concepts. The best reason for this is that relating one existent to another depends on one who relates them, who compares them with one another, and a concept dependent on comparing and relating cannot describe a thing which is entified and independent of mental respects.

For example, the relation between two brothers, or the relation between a father and his children, is not a entified thing which exists between the related terms; rather, by considering two individuals who have come into existence by means of one father and mother, and who share this respect, the mind abstracts a relation with similar terms called brotherhood.

Considering that the father is the preparatory cause for the appearance of his child and not the reverse, the mind abstracts a relation with opposite terms called fatherhood. It is not the case that with the birth of a child another entified thing comes about called the relation of fatherhood, and that after the birth of a second child yet another objective thing called brotherhood appears between the two children.

Likewise, the concepts of greater and smaller, closer and farther, equality and simultaneity, etc., are all concepts which are obtained by comparison, and none of them has a entified instance, although each of them has a specific source of abstraction, and one cannot attribute relational concepts in an arbitrary manner.

Among the evidence for the respectival nature of relation is that, on the one hand, it is applied to the relation between God Almighty and His creatures, while on the other hand, it can hold between two nonentified things, between an existent and a nonexistent, and even between two impossible objects. It is clear that God Almighty cannot be the subject of any accident, and likewise, a nonentified thing and a nonexistent cannot be characterized by entified objective properties.

By examining other relational categories it becomes clear that, except for the two terms of the relation, which are the source of abstraction for these concepts, there is no other entified object in existence by the name of the objective relation, let alone that a certain configuration should appear in the subject due

to the influence of the relation. The attribution (ittisaf) of these concepts to objective things is no reason for their existence as entified objects, as is the case with regard to all secondary philosophical intelligibles.

1. Cf., Suhravardi, Talwihat, p. 11.

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