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Lesson 49: The Reality of Knowledge

Introduction

Many issues, most of which have to do with epistemology, can be raised regarding knowledge, and in this book, as well, the most important of them were mentioned in the part on epistemology. However, other discussions of knowledge are also possible from an ontological perspective, and philosophers have mentioned these in various places in their philosophical discussions. Sadr al-Muta'allihin has set discussions about knowledge as an independent topic.

Among these discussions is that of the immateriality of knowledge and the knower, which is appropriate to discussion of the 'immaterial and material,' and for this reason we mention it in this section, and following this, we take up the problem of the unity of the knower and the known.

Regarding the ontology of knowledge several questions may be raised, such as, what is the reality of knowledge and whether all types of knowledge have a single whatness, or at the very least, whether they all belong to a single specific category, and whether all types of knowledge are immaterial or whether they are all material, or are some of them immaterial and others material?

In order to answer such questions it is first necessary to take a glance at the types of knowledge, which were discussed to some extent in the part on epistemology.

A Review of the Types of Knowledge

Awareness of an existent is either obtained without the intermediary of a form or concept, in which case it is called 'presentational knowledge,' or it occurs through the intermediary of a sensory or imaginary form or through a rational or prehensive (wahmi) concept, in which case it is called 'acquired knowledge' and is specific to souls attached to matter.

A level of the existence of the soul called 'mind' (dhin) is considered to be like a receptacle for acquired knowledge, and mind is said to have various levels and aspects. Some of its levels oversee others, so

that the lower levels obtain judgments concerning external reality in relation to the mind and another knowledge corresponding to this is then obtained, as discussed in Lesson Nineteen.

Human awareness of a single real state of affairs (nafs al-amr) is reflected in the mind in the form of a proposition, the simplest form of which is a predicative proposition which in turn may be divided into simple existential propositions (halliyyah basitah), compound propositions (halliyyah murakkabah), and other sorts of propositions.

In a predicative proposition there are at least two mental concepts, one of which is the subject and the other the predicate, and man takes into consideration the relation between them and makes a judgment of establishment (thubut) for affirmative propositions (qadhiyyah mujabah) or of absence of establishment for negative propositions, although there are differences of opinion in this field which were indicated in Lesson Fourteen.

Judgment or assertion (in technical terms) is obtained when a person believes in the purport of the proposition, even if the belief is mere opinion. The belief of a person does not always correspond to reality, and sometimes one may have beliefs about which one is convinced and definite but which are contrary to reality, cases of which are called compound ignorance.

Considering these points, acquired knowledge may be investigated along various lines, and each case may be discussed separately, but that which is usually taken up as a topic of discussion is the immateriality of perception, especially rational perception.

The Reality of Knowledge by Presence

In presentational knowledge, the essence of the known is present to the knower, and the knower perceives an entified existence, and this perceiving is not something external to the essence of the knower, but rather is an aspect of his existence, and is similar to the analytical accidents of a body which are considered to be aspects of its existence.

In other words, just as extension is not something separate from the existence of a body, but is a concept which the mind obtains through its own analysis, so too, knowledge by presence does not have an existence separate from the existence of the knower. The concepts of knowledge and knower are obtained through mental analysis of the existence of the knower.

An instance of it in the case of God Almighty is His Sacred Essence, which is neither substance nor accident, and in the case of creatures, is their rational or spiritual substance itself. Naturally, such knowledge will be neither an accident nor a quality.

Knowledge by presence may be divided into kinds, about some of which all of the Islamic philosophers are in agreement, and there is disagreement about others.

To explain, the known in presentational knowledge is sometimes the essence of the knower himself, such as self-knowledge in the case of souls and complete immaterial existents. In these cases the knower and the known do not have numerically different existences, and the difference between being the knower and being the known is respectival (i'tibari) and will depend on mental respect.

This is the kind of knowledge by presence about which there is general agreement among philosophers, including the Peripatetics and the Illuminationists. Sometimes the knower and known have numerically distinct existences, but not in the sense that one of them is completely separate and independent of the other. But is the very dependence and relation to the other, such as the knowledge of the existence-giving cause for its effect and vice versa. In this way two other kinds of presentational knowledge are obtained, one is the knowledge of the emanating cause for its effect and the other is the knowledge of the effect for the cause.

These two kinds are accepted by the Illuminationists and by Sadr al-Muta'allihin and his followers. All of them agree that the effect's presentational knowledge of its cause is specific to immaterial effects, for material existence is diffusion itself in the realm of space and time, and has no presence by which to perceive the essence of its cause.

However, with regard to the cause's presentational knowledge of its effect, Sadr al-Muta'allihin and some of his followers believed that in this case as well, the effect must be immaterial, and that basically knowledge about material existence insofar as it is material is not obtained, for particulars diffused in time and space have no presence that the essence of the knower might perceive.

However, others such as Muhaqqiq Sabzavari do not accept this condition for this kind of knowledge. They hold that the absence of material particulars from one another is not incompatible with their having a presence in relation to an existent which existentially encompasses them, as the diffusion of temporal existents in the realm of time is not incompatible with their collection in relation to the realm of perpetuity (dahr) and the existents encompassing time, and this is the correct position.

A fourth kind of knowledge by presence is also imaginable, and this is the knowledge of one another of two immaterial effects at the same level, but to establish that there is such a kind of knowledge by proof is difficult. It is to be concluded that in all the kinds of knowledge by presence, knowledge is the essence of the knower himself and is immaterial, and naturally it is not a kind of psychic accident or quality, although it is possible for the known to be a substance or an accident, and according to the endorsed position, will be either immaterial or material.

The Nature of Acquired Knowledge

Without a doubt, knowledge in the sense of definite belief, as opposed to opinion and doubt, is nevertheless similar to opinion and doubt in that it is a mental state or quality, and like other types of mental qualities, it is devoid of matter, for it does not make sense to suppose that a material accident

occurs in an immaterial subject.

However, judgment about knowledge in the sense of logical propositions and their parts requires further attention, for as was indicated, a proposition is composed of different parts which generally cannot all be considered psychic qualities. Perhaps the reason for differences of opinion among some philosophers is that in some cases they consider one part of a proposition and in other cases another.

In any case, the pillars of a predicative proposition, which are its subject and predicate, are two independent concepts, each of which is separately conceivable and without need of conceiving something else. But the case is different regarding relation and judgment, for they cannot occur without conceiving the subject and predicate, and their concepts have prepositional and relative meanings.

On the other hand, the concept of subject and predicate refer to substances and accidents, essences and objective attributes and states of affairs (nafs al-amr). However, relation is something related to the one who relates, and does not refer to an objective instance. Likewise, judgment is the activity of the one who judges, and can only refer to a kind of unity or union between the instance of the subject and the instance of the predicate, but it itself does not have an instance in the external world. (Take note.)

For this reason it may be said that relating something to another thing is a mental activity, and the soul is the creative agent of the relation. Likewise, the judgment upon which the strength of a proposition rests and by means of which an assertive proposition becomes distinct from a mere collection of ideas is the action of the soul.

However, the idea of the subject or of the predicate does not depend on the action of the soul, and it is possible that it may appear in the mind involuntarily, although it requires a kind of attention of the soul.

It may be concluded that the dependence of relation and judgment on the soul is a 'productive dependence' (qiyam suduri); however, the dependence of the idea of the subject and predicate may be considered a 'dissolving dependence' (qiyam hululi), and their existence can be interpreted as a kind of 'impression in the mind.'

However, it must be noted that this impression and engraving is not like the drawing of a picture on paper or some other material subject; rather it is a quality of the soul, and is immaterial. For material accidents have a relation of position to their subjects, are ostensible by the senses, and are divisible subordinate to their subjects, while such things are not possible for the soul and things pertaining to it.

The productive dependence of relation and judgment [on the soul], though by itself not a reason for their being immaterial, nevertheless, observing that existence is parasitic on the existence of the subject and predicate, their immateriality is also established. In addition to this, their indivisibility is the best reason for their being immaterial.

The Immateriality of Perception

Reviewing the types of knowledge and observing the unity of knowledge by presence with the essence of the immaterial knower, and that knowledge, in the sense of belief and mental forms and concepts, is a psychic quality, and observing that relation and judgment play the role of intermediaries among them, the immateriality of all the types of knowledge becomes clear. In reality, their immateriality is proven by way of the immateriality of the knower.

However, there are also other ways of proving the immateriality of knowledge and perception, some of which will be mentioned. But first, we should point out that the terms knowledge and perception in these discussions are used as synonyms and include sensation, imagination and reasoning.

1. The first argument for the immateriality of perception, namely, ‘the argument of the impossibility of impressing the larger in the smaller,’ is famous, and one version of it is the following.

Sensory vision is the lowest kind of perception which is imagined to be material, and materialists have interpreted it as physio-chemical and physiological actions and reactions. However, by paying precise attention to this very kind of perception it becomes clear that the perception itself cannot be considered to be material, and the material actions and reactions can be accepted only as preparatory conditions, for we see large forms which cover an area of dozens of square meters which are several times larger than the area of our entire bodies, let alone the visual organs or the brain!

If these perceptual forms were material and projected in the organs of vision or other organs of the body, these forms could never be larger than the size of their locations, for material projection and impression without correspondence to a location is impossible. Observing that we see these perceptual forms within ourselves, we cannot but accept that they are related to a plane of the soul (martabah-ye mithali-ye nafs, the imaginal plane of the soul), and in this way, both their own immateriality and that of the soul are proven.

Some materialists have replied that what we see are little pictures like microfilms which come into existence in the nervous system, and that with the help of context and making relative comparisons we find out their real sizes.

But this nostrum will not solve the problem, for, first of all, knowing the size of that which is represented by a form is different from seeing a large form, and secondly, assuming that the visible form is very little, and that we enlarge it with skills obtained from experience and through the use of context and by making relative comparisons, as if they were put under a magnifying glass of the mind, finally we still find the enlarged form in the mind, and the above-mentioned reason would be exactly repeated regarding this mental or imaginary form.

2. Another argument is that if sensory perception were a kind of material action and reaction, it would

always occur whenever the material conditions were satisfied, while most of the time despite the satisfaction of the material conditions, the perception does not occur because of the attention of the soul to another matter.

Hence, it may be concluded that having perceptions depends on the attention of the soul and cannot be considered a kind of material action and reaction, even though these actions and reactions play an introductory role for the occurrence of perception, and as a result of the attachment of the soul to the body, the soul is in need of material grounds and preparatory conditions.

3. The third argument is that we can perceive two visible forms together and compare them with each other, so as to find, for example, that they are distinct, similar or identical to each other, or that one is larger than the other. Assuming that each of them is impressed in a part of the body, and that their perception is that very impression, this implies that every part of the perceptual organ perceives that very form impressed in itself and is unaware of the other forms.

So, what perceptual faculty perceives them together and compares them? If it is assumed that there is another material organ which perceives them together, the same problem will be repeated, for each material organ possesses parts, and if perception means the impression of forms in a material location each part will perceive the form impressed in it, and in conclusion, no comparison will be performed.

So, there is no other alternative but to accept that a simple perceptual faculty perceives both of them, and finds both of them with its own unity and simplicity. Such a faculty can be neither a material substance nor a material accident. Therefore, perception will not be the impression of a form in a material location. With this argument, it is also proved that perception and the perceiver are both immaterial.

4. The fourth argument is that we sometimes perceive something and remember it after the passage of many years. If it is assumed that past perception is a special sort of material effect in one of the organs of the body, then after the passage of dozens of years it would have to be erased or changed, especially given the fact that the cells of the body change every so many years. Even if the cells remained, due to metabolism and the absorption of new nutrients, they will have changed, so how can we remember exactly that very form, or compare a new form with it, and perceive their similarities?

It is possible that it will be said that every cell or every new material part inherits the effects of the previous parts and retains them. But even under this assumption the question will remain as to what faculty perceives the unity or similarity of the previous and present forms.

It is clear that without this comparison and perception, remembrance and recognition could not take place. This argument becomes clearer with attention to the doctrines of substantial motion and the continual passing away of material things and in one respect is similar to the argument given in Lesson Forty-Four, where scientific and empirical premises were employed for the establishment of the immateriality of the soul.

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