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Lesson 50: The Union of the Knower and the Known

Introduction

In his books the *Shifa*¹ and the *Isharat*,² Shaykh al-Ra'is (Ibn Sina) quotes several Greek philosophers to the effect that when a rational existent apprehends something it becomes united with it. He also reports that Porphyry has written an essay on the topic. However, he himself criticizes this theory and takes it to be impossible.

On the other hand, in his *Asfar* and other works, Sadr al-Muta'allihin confirms it and insists on the correctness of this theory, and he generalizes it to include all kinds of knowledge, even sensory perception.

This strange disagreement between the two great philosophers on this topic naturally arouses one's curiosity and interest in solving the problem and deciding between the two sides of the conflict. For this reason, at the end of this section we devote a lesson to this topic.

The Controversy

In the previous lesson we learned that in presentational knowledge of the self there is no numerical difference or distinction between the knower and the known. For this reason it should be called the unity (wahdat) of knowledge, knower and known. It was indicated that this knowledge by presence is accepted by the Peripatetics, including Ibn Sina.

Hence, there can be no disagreement about the union (ittihad) of the knower and the known concerning this case, especially as the expression 'union,' as opposed to the expression 'unity' (wahdat), is used in places where there is a kind of numerical difference and duality, though in the knowledge of the self there is no sort of numerical difference whatsoever, except for conceptual respect (i'tibar).

Apparently, Ibn Sina holds that those who accept the union of knower and known confine the discussion to intellection, as opposed to imagination (takhayyul) and sensation. At the most it can be extended to knowledge by presence, for in the language of the philosophers, the term 'intellect' ('aql) and its respectivals are used repeatedly with regard to knowledge by presence.

However, Sadr al-Muta'allihin expanded the scope of the discussion to include knowledge and perception without qualification, including acquired as well as presential knowledge, and including reasoning, imagination and sensation, and in all these cases he subscribed to the union of knower and known.

Explanation of the Topic

Before dealing with the core of the problem, the concept of 'union' (ittihad) must be made clear. We must see precisely what is intended by those who accept the union of the rational agent ('aql) with the intelligible (ma'qul) or the union of the knower with the known. Perhaps the correct perception of this meaning will provide considerable help in solving the problem.

The union of two existents will be either a union with respect to their whatnesses or with respect to their existences, or with respect to the existence of one and the whatness of the other.

However, the union of two complete whatnesses implies a transformation in whatness which is a contradiction, for the assumption of a complete whatness is the assumption of a specific conceptual mold which does not correspond to any other conceptual mold, and the union of two complete whatnesses would imply the correspondence of two distinct molds, such as the union of a circle and a triangle, to use an example of sensibles to illustrate the case regarding intelligibles.

The union of a complete specific whatness with an incomplete whatness (genus and difference), according to Aristotle's apparatus of genus and difference, is unobjectionable and ubiquitous, but this has no relation to intellection and perception. In intellection, such union does not occur. In addition sometimes man intellects a whatness completely distinct from the whatness of man and such that there is no shared whatish property between them.

Therefore, if one were to believe that in perception the whatness of the perceiving existent becomes united with the whatness of the perceived existent, and, for example, that the whatness of man becomes one with the whatness of a tree or an animal, this would be contradictory and impossible.

Likewise, the union of the existence of the perceiver with the whatness of the perceived and the reverse are also impossible, and even if the union between existence and whatness is in some sense correct, it is the union of the existence of a single existent with its own whatness, not with the whatness of another existent.

Hence, the only hypothesis that can be maintained regarding the union of the subject and object of

intellection is that of the union of their existences. Now we must see whether the union between two existences is possible or not. If it is possible, in how many ways can it occur?

Types of Union of Existence

The union of two or more entified existences, in the sense of a kind of dependence or interdependence between them, is possible, and may occur in several ways.

a) The union of substance and accident, in view of the fact that an accident is dependent on a substance and cannot be independent of its subject. This union may be more firmly established on the basis the position of those who hold that an accident is an aspect or level of the existence of the substance.

b) The union of matter and form, for the form cannot be separated from its locus and continue independently with its own existence. This kind of union is sometimes generalized to body and soul, given that it is not possible for the soul to come about without a body, although it may survive independently.

c) The union of several matters in the shadow of a unitary form to which they are attached, such as the union of the elements which compose a plant or animal. This kind of union is really an accidental union, and a true union would only be obtained with the union of each element with the form.

d) The union of prime matter, assumed to lack any sort of actuality, with the form which grants it actuality. Sometimes this kind of union is considered to be a real union. However, with the rejection of prime matter as a entified substance lacking actuality, there is no room left for this kind of union.

e) Another kind of union can be held to occur between two effects of a single emanating cause, considering each of them to be united with the cause, such that separation between them is not possible, although calling such relations 'union' is not without imprecision.

e. The union between the existence-granting cause and its effect which is the relation itself and dependence on it. There is a specific sort of gradation between such a cause and its effects. This sort of union, according to the fundamentality of existence and its gradation, is called the 'union of the real with the diluted' (ittihad haqiqah wa raqiqah).

It must be noted that the union under discussion is a union obtained as a result of perception, and this is the union of the knower with the existence of the known-in-itself (ma'lum bi al-dhat), that is, the very perceptual form which occurs in the mind, not union with an objective existent. Therefore, the union of matter and form, or objective substance and accident is irrelevant to this problem.

Considering the kinds of union and those philosophers hold acquired knowledge to be a psychic quality, it is easy to accept the first kind of union, and, naturally, those like Ibn Sina would not deny this sort of union.

However, Sadr al-Muta'allihin did not like this kind of union and he tried to prove another kind similar to the union of matter and form; that is, he considers the relation between the soul and perceptual forms to be like that of prime matter and its forms. Just as the actuality of prime matter is obtained in the shadow of its union with a form, actual intellection occurs for the soul in the shadow of union with intellectual forms.

A Review of the Theory of Sadr al-Muta'allihin

In order to make clear the theory of Sadr al-Muta'allihin, an excerpt from his own words is presented here:

The existence of the form which is actually intellected is the same as the existence of the intellecting faculty ('aqiliyyah) for the soul (and in technical terms, its existence-in-itself is the same as its existence-for-the-other), and if it is supposed that the perceptual form has another existence, and that the relation of it to the perceiving existent is only the relation of an object and its locus, then one would have to be able to posit that each of them has an existence independent of the other, while the intellected form does not have an existence apart from this very aspect of being intellected, an aspect which is its very essence itself, whether or not the one who intellects it is outside of this essence.

Previously we said that correlatives (and among them the subject and object of intellection) are partners with respect to the degree of their existence. This judgment also holds for sensible forms.

...Others say: Psychic substance has a passive state in relation to intellectual form and that intellection is nothing other than this passivity. However, how can something essentially devoid of intellectual light perceive the intellectual form that essentially possesses the property of being intellected? Is it possible for a blind eye to see something?!

...In reality, the actual intellecting faculty ('aqiliyyah) of the soul is like the actualization of prime matter by means of a corporeal form, and just as matter in and of itself is not determinate, the soul in and of itself does not intellect, and becomes an actual subject of intellection in the shadow of union with the intellectual form.[3](#)

There are several controversial points in this explanation:

1. Regarding his statement, "if the relation between the perceptual form and the perceiver is a relation of an object and its locus, then it must be possible to consider separate existences for each of them," it may be asked what is meant by 'separate existences.' If what is meant is that the perceptual form can exist without a location, this implication would be incorrect because no accident or form which is in need of a location can occur without it.

If what is meant is that the intellect can consider them separately, this is also possible in the case of perceptual forms. In addition to this, Sadr al-Muta'allihin himself considers the existence of accidents to

be aspects of the existence of substance, and he does not accept their independent existence. So, what would be wrong with considering knowledge a kind of accident and an aspect of the existence of the knower?

2. Regarding his claim, “Being actually intellectured is an essential property of intellectual forms, whether or not there is an intellect outside of its essence,” it must be said that the terms ‘being known’ and ‘being intellectured’ are relational, and the supposition of one without the supposition of an existent which is knower is impossible. At most it may be said that these two terms may at times apply to a single existent, such as knowledge of the self, and sometimes the term knower corresponds to an existent outside of the essence of the known.

The mere applicability of the term ‘object of intellection’ (ma‘qul) to something is no reason to suppose that the term ‘subject of intellection’ (‘aqil) is also true of the whatness or existence of that very thing.

In other words, the additional concept of ‘object of intellection’ cannot be considered to be essential for something (whether ‘essential’ is understood in accordance with the Isagoge, or in accordance with the Kitab al-Burhan [Aristotle’s logic]) so that with the help of the principle of ‘the equality of correlatives’ the property of being ‘subject of intellection’ may be established for its essence.

Moreover, a requirement of the above-mentioned principle, as Shaykh al-Ra’is (Ibn Sina) states in his Ta’liqat, is ‘equality in implication, not in the level of existence.’⁴ It may be concluded that the actuality of the property of being an object of intellection for a perceptual form does not require anything beyond that it possess an actual intellecting subject, whether in its own essence or outside of it.

3. As to the analogy between the passivity of the soul for perceptual forms and a blind eye, it must be said that, firstly, it is possible for a person to consider the soul the agent of the perceptual form, as in the cases of judgment and abstracted concepts and all logical and philosophical secondary intelligibles; secondly, why not compare the soul with a seeing eye which obtains actual vision when faced with a visible object?

As for the analogy between the soul and prime matter, according to the accepted theory, which denies prime matter that lacks actuality, there is no need for further explanation of it.

Inquiry into a Problem

Careful attention to the points mentioned makes clear that the relation between the knower and the known cannot be explained in one way for all cases; rather, giving due consideration to the kinds of knowledge involved, each case must be reviewed separately to determine the relation. We now list the conclusions reached thus far:

1. In the case of presentational knowledge of an essence, the knowledge, the knower, and the known have a single existence, and there is no sort of numerical difference to be found among them, except

according to differences in rational respects. If the expression 'union' (ittihad) is applied in such cases it is because of the numerical differences among the respects suggested; otherwise, we would have to use the expression 'unity' (wahdat). And there is general agreement on the unity of the knower and the known in this case.

2. What is meant by those who believe in the union of the knower and the known is not the union of the knower and the accidentally known (ma'lum bi al- 'aradh), but the union of the knower and the known-by-essence (ma'lum bi al-dhat; i.e., the perceptual form).

3. Likewise, what they mean is not the union of the whatnesses of the knower and known, for this would require a change in whatness, a contradiction in terms.

4. The union of the existence of one thing with the whatness of another is also obviously incorrect.

5. In the knowledge by presence that the emanating cause has of its effect and vice versa, a 'union of the real with the diluted,' or, in other words, a graded union of levels of existence, is obtained, for the existence of one of them is the very relation and dependence on the other and is not independent in itself.

6. The knowledge by presence that two immaterial effects have of one another, assuming that there is such knowledge, can be considered an accidental union between the knower and the known, for each of them has an essential union with its emanating cause.

7. In acquired knowledge of the type which is considered to be the action of the soul, in which the soul is considered to be an agent by self-disclosure (f'il bi al-tajjali), an agent by agreement (f'il bi al-ridha) or an agent by foreknowledge (f'il bi al-'inayah), the union here may also be taken to be a kind of graded union of levels of existence.

8. In the type of acquired knowledge which is considered to be a quality of the soul, the sort of union which holds between that which is known-by- essence—a specific quality of the soul—and the substance of the soul is one between a substance and accident.

¹. Cf., Al-Shifa, 'Tabi'at,' fann 6, maqalah 5, bab 6.

². Cf., Isharat, namat 7.

³. Cf., Asfar, Vol. 3, pp. 313–320; Vol. 6, pp. 165–168.

⁴. Cf., Ta'liqat, pp. 76, 91, 95

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