

Lesson 61: The Way to Know God

Introduction

The concept which common people have about Almighty God and the meaning which is understood upon hearing the word ‘God’ or its synonyms in various languages is that of an existent which has created the cosmos. In other words, God is known as ‘the Creator.’ Probably other concepts, such as the Lord and the One Who is worthy of worship are also borne in mind. In fact, God is known as the agent of the work of creation and its consequences.

With regard to the fact that these sorts of concepts are abstracted from divine action and sometimes from the deeds of creatures, such as worship, philosophers have attempted to use a concept which refers to the sacred divine essence, without need to consider God’s deeds or creatures’. In this way, they have selected the concept of the Necessary Existent (*wajib al-wujud*), that is, one whose being is necessary and indestructible.

This concept is universal and essentially is a common term which can be applied to numerous instances. Therefore, Allah, which is a proper name (*‘alam- e shakhsi*), must be considered the best name or word [for God]. Perhaps this noble name was first propounded by the prophets and religious leaders.

In order to understand the meaning of a proper name, it is necessary to know the named person. Such knowledge is obtained through sensory perception in the case of sensory objects, and in the case of non-sensory objects it can only be obtained through knowledge by presence. When an existent is imperceptible, the way to know the person is limited to knowledge by presence.

Although the establishment of such knowledge is related to philosophy, the knowledge itself is not obtained through philosophical discussions. That which is obtained through intellectual efforts and philosophical demonstrations will be naturally limited to intellectual universal concepts. At his point the reason for the selection by the divine sages of the expression ‘the Necessary Existent’ becomes clear.

In the chapters of this part we shall discuss to what extent and by what means Allah basically can be

known. However, the subject of these discussions will be God, that is, the Necessary Existent, in accordance with philosophical and theological tradition.

The Science of Theology and its Subject

The science of theology is the noblest and most valuable of philosophical sciences. Without knowledge of Allah, the true perfection of man is not possible, because, as was proven in its own place, the true perfection of man occurs only in the shadow of divine proximity. It is obvious that proximity to Almighty God without knowledge of Him will be impossible.

Although the establishment of the subject of a science is not considered a topic within that science itself, and if a scientific subject needs to be established, according to certain principles, this must be done in another science which is prior to it in rank, sometimes the existence of the subject of a science is discussed in its introduction as one of its principles.

Among them, discussions of the existence of Almighty God are traditionally found in theology itself. Therefore, although we have provided a satisfactory discussion of this in the chapters on cause and effect, especially in Lesson Thirty–Seven, in accordance with the tradition of the theologians, this topic will be discussed independently at the beginning of this part.

Before presenting the reasoning involved, two points should be observed. One is that a number of outstanding figures have claimed that knowledge of Almighty God is something innate and without need of philosophical reasoning. The other point is that some philosophers have expressed the view that the demonstrations for the existence of God are invalid.¹ Therefore, it is necessary first to review these two issues.

The Innateness of Knowledge of God

The expression ‘innate’ (fitri) is used for entities which depend on innate disposition (fitrat), that is, the way in which an entity has been created. Therefore, innate things have two characteristics: first, that they need not be taught or learned; and second, that they cannot be changed or transformed. To these, a third may be added, that the innate things for every kind of existent may be found among all the individuals of that kind to a greater or lesser degree.

Those things that are called innate in the case of man may be divided into two general classes: first, a knowledge that is implied in human existence; and second, desires and inclinations that result from the creation of human beings. But sometimes the term ‘innate’ is used specifically for humans, in contrast to ‘instinctive,’ which is also used for animals.

With regard to Almighty God, it is sometimes said that knowledge of God is innate, and is among the first class of innate things. Sometimes it is also said that the quest for God and worship of God are due to

human nature, and counted among the second class of innate things. But here, the topic is knowledge of God.

What is meant by innate knowledge of God is either knowledge by presence, some degree of which exists in all humans, and perhaps there is an allusion to this in the noble ayah:

***'Am I not your Lord? They said: Yes.'* (7:176).**

It was mentioned in Lesson Forty–Nine that an effect which possesses a degree of immateriality will have a degree of presentational knowledge of its creative cause, even though it may be unconscious or semiconscious and, due to its weakness, improperly interpreted by the mind.[2](#)

This knowledge becomes stronger due to the perfection of the soul and the concentration of the attention of the heart on the sacred divine presence and by means of good deeds and worship. And among the Friends (awliya') of God it reaches such a degree of clarity that they see God more clearly than anything else, as is found in the Supplication of 'Arafah: *"Has anything other than You a manifestation that You lack, so that it may manifest You?!"*

Sometimes what is meant by innate knowledge of God is acquired knowledge. Innate acquired knowledge is either of a primary self–evident proposition, which is related to the nature of the intellect, or it is of secondary self–evident propositions, which are what logicians call 'innate things.'

Sometimes the term is also used in a general way for theoretical propositions (nazariyyat) which come close to being self–evident, because anyone can understand them with his God–given intellect, and there is no need for complicated technical demonstrations. Likewise, people who are illiterate and unlearned also can discover the existence of Almighty God with simple reasoning.

It may be concluded that innate knowledge of God in the sense of presentational knowledge of Almighty God has degrees, the lowest of which exists in all people, even if they are not completely aware of it, and the highest degrees are restricted to perfect believers and Friends of God. No degree of this knowledge is obtained by means of intellectual or philosophical demonstration.

However, in the sense of acquired knowledge close to being self–evident, this is obtained by means of the intellect and reasoning. Its closeness to self–evidence and simplicity of reasoning does not mean that it is not in need of demonstration.

The Possibility of Demonstrating the Existence of God

Another topic which must be discussed here is whether a rational logical demonstration for the existence of Almighty God can be formulated or not. If so, how can one justify the claim of some of the great metaphysicians, such as Ibn Sina, who hold that it is incorrect to formulate demonstrations for the existence of God Almighty? If not, then how can the existence of Almighty God be established?

The answer is that without any doubt, acquired knowledge of Almighty God by means of rational philosophical demonstration is possible, and all the philosophers and theologians, including Ibn Sina himself, have formulated numerous demonstrations for this matter. But, sometimes philosophers and logicians restrict the use of the term ‘demonstration’ (burhan) to demonstrations from cause to effect (burhan limmi).

Therefore, it is possible that what is meant by those who deny that a demonstration can be formulated for the existence of God is that there is no demonstration from cause to effect for this, for such a demonstration is formulated to prove something whose cause is known, and by way of knowledge of the cause, the existence of the effect is established.

However, the existence of Almighty God is not the effect of any cause, so as to be established by knowledge of its cause. Evidence in favor of this reading is to be found in the *Shifa*, in which it is said: “There is no demonstration for it because there is no cause for it.”

It is also possible that what is meant by the denial of there being any demonstration for the existence of Almighty God is that no demonstration can lead us to the entified individual existence of God. The utmost that can be obtained by demonstration are universal terms such as ‘the Necessary Existent’ and ‘the cause of all causes,’ and the like. As was mentioned in the introduction to this lesson, knowledge of the individual immaterial thing is impossible except through knowledge by presence.

Another sense can also be mentioned, that what is meant by demonstrations for the existence of God is that creatures have a Creator, or existents which are effects have a cause of causes, or that contingent existents are in need of the Necessary Existent. So, these demonstrations basically demonstrate predicates to be true of creatures, not directly the existence of the Creator or the Necessary Existent. This reading is more compatible with those who claim: “There is no demonstration of the Necessary Existent by essence but only by accidents.”

Demonstrations from Cause to Effect and from Effect to Cause

Given the first reading, the question arises that if there is no demonstration from cause to effect for the existence of God, then why is this term used for some of the demonstrations regarding this problem? Doesn’t the fact that a demonstration is not from cause to effect harm its validity?

A sufficiently detailed answer to this question requires research into the kinds of demonstrations, which would divert us from our goal. That which we can briefly say here is that if we define demonstration from cause to effect as is done below, then not only in other areas of philosophy, but also in the case of God Almighty, we can formulate a demonstration from cause to effect:

A demonstration from cause to effect is a demonstration whose middle term is the cause for the application of the predicate to the subject of the conclusion, whether or not it is also the cause of the

predicate itself, and whether the cause is objective and real or analytic and intellectual.

According to this definition, if the middle term of the demonstration is a concept of a contingent and one ontologically impoverished (faqr-e wujud), and the like, it can be considered a demonstration from cause to effect, for according to philosophers, “The cause of the need of an effect for a cause is essential contingency or ontological poverty.”³ Hence, the establishment of the Necessary

Existent for contingent entities may be accomplished by means of something which, according to intellectual analysis, is the cause of their need for the Necessary Existent.

It may be concluded that although the essence of the Necessary Existent is not the effect of any cause, dependence on the Necessary Existent can be attributed to contingent entities because of their essential contingency or ontological poverty, and as has been indicated, this is the purport of the demonstrations regarding this problem.

However, if one requires that in a demonstration from cause to effect the middle term must be an objective or real cause, then not only in the case of the Necessary Existent, but regarding most philosophical problems, this sort of demonstration will not be found.

In any case, philosophical demonstrations based on the rational implications between the terms of the demonstration, whether they are called limmi (from cause to effect) or inni (from effect to cause), are of sufficient logical worth.

To call a demonstration ‘inni’ does not detract from its validity and worth. Rather, it may be said that every demonstration from cause to effect involves a demonstration from effect to cause that has as its major premise the impossibility of the detachment of an effect from its complete cause. Take note.

¹ Cf., *Ilahiyat Shifa'*, maqalah 8, fasl 4; and *Ta'liqat*, p. 70

² Cf., Lesson Thirteen.

³ Cf., Lesson Thirty-Two.

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