

Lesson 66: Attributes of Essence

Introduction

As indicated in the previous lesson, the concepts which refer to ontological perfections and do not denote any kind of deficiency or limitation are applicable to the sacred divine essence. All of them can be considered to be attributes of the divine essence, such as Light (nur), Magnificence (baha'), Beauty (jamal), Perfection (kamal), Love (hubb), Bliss (bahjah), and other Names and attributes which are presented in the noble verses of the Qur'an, the sacred narrations and the supplications of the Infallible Ones ('a), which do not refer to the station of action.

However, what are usually mentioned as attributes of essence are Life (hayat), Knowledge ('ilm) and Power (qudrah), and most mutakallamin have added other attributes, such as Hearing (sami'), Seeing (basir), Willing (murid) and Speaking (mutakallim). There are discussions about whether these concepts are attributes of essence or attributes of action, which would require a very lengthy review. Here we shall present a discussion of the threefold attributes of essence, followed by a discussion of some of the other well known attributes.

Life

Existents which are familiar to man may be divided into two general groups, the living and the non-living. The attribute called life (hayat) is attributed to living existents which are conscious and possess voluntary movement, and in the Arabic language the word hayawan (animate) is appropriately applied to living existents.

However, if we are precise, it becomes clear that the application of the attribute life to material existents is a kind of 'wasf bi hal muta'allaq' (description of something in terms of another thing on which it is dependent), and actually, life is an essential description of their souls, and is accidentally related to their bodies.

After learning that animal souls have a degree of immateriality (tajarrud) (although this is an imaginal

immateriality), we come to the conclusion that life implies immateriality, and furthermore that life is more expressive than immateriality, because immateriality, as was previously indicated, is a negative concept.

In other words, just as extension is an essential characteristic of material existents, life is an essential characteristic of immaterial existence. Likewise, knowledge and will, which are also implied by life, are immaterial.

Therefore, the concept of life denotes an ontological perfection, which can be extended to existents which are not attached to matter. Hence, all immaterial things possess the essential attribute of life, the highest level of which is specific to the sacred divine essence. Hence, given that the divine essence is immaterial, there is no need for further demonstration to establish that life is one of the essential attributes of God, the Supreme.

Here, several points should be mentioned.

One is that sometimes life and living are used in another sense, which includes plants, but this sense includes an aspect of imperfection, for it implies growth and reproduction which are characteristics of material things and in this discussion such a sense is not intended.

Another point is that although life in the intended sense implies knowledge, will and power, this implication does not entail conceptual identity. The best evidence for this is that life is a self-contained concept without any sort of relation, as opposed to the other concepts mentioned for which there is a relation to their own objects (the known, the willed, that over which one has power), which are considered concepts involving relation. Therefore, if life is defined as knowledge, power and will, this will be a definition in terms of its implications.

The third point is that it is possible that the life of God, the Supreme, may be established in this way: life is one of the ontological perfections of creatures, and it is impossible for the creative cause to lack a perfection which emanates to its own creatures, but rather, the creative cause should necessarily possess that perfection in a more perfect form. Furthermore, after knowledge and power are established for God, the Supreme, life, which is implied by them, will also be established.

Knowledge

The discussion of the knowledge of God is one of the most difficult in metaphysics, and it is for this reason that philosophers and mutakallimin have many differences of opinion in this area, which are presented, discussed and criticized in the detailed works of kalam and philosophy. For example, some philosophers consider both knowledge of His essence and knowledge of His creatures to be the same as the divine essence.

Others consider knowledge of the essence to be the same as the essence, but knowledge of creatures to be forms dependent on but external to the essence. Yet others have considered knowledge of

creatures to be the same as their existences. Various and sometimes strange views have been narrated from the mutakallimin, some even denying God's knowledge of His own sacred essence.

The fact is that the divine essence in its very unity and simplicity is both the same as His knowledge of His own essence and knowledge of all creatures, including the immaterial and material ones.

Knowledge of Essence

One who is aware of the incorporeality and immateriality of the divine essence can easily understand that His sacred essence is the same as His knowledge of Himself, just as is true for every independent immaterial (non-accidental) existent.

If one has any doubt about the necessity of knowledge of one's essence for all immaterial existents, in the case of God, the Supreme, the following argument can be employed. Knowledge of essence is an ontological perfection which can be found in some existents, such as man, and God, the Supreme, possesses all ontological perfections infinitely; so He also possesses this one in its highest level.

Anyway, the demonstration of God's knowledge of His sacred essence on the basis of the principles of transcendent theosophy (hikmat muta'aliyah) is an easy task.

Knowledge of Creatures

The demonstration of knowledge of creatures, especially prior to their appearance, and its philosophical explanation is not so easy. In this regard there are various positions and views, the most important of which are the following:

1. The position of the Peripatetics is based on the idea that knowledge of creatures is by means of intellectual forms, which are concomitants (lawazim) of the divine essence.

This position has some notable problems, for, if these forms are assumed to be the same as the divine essence, this implies the existence of multiplicity in the simple divine essence. If they are external to the essence—as is understood from the expression lawazim al-dhat (concomitants of essence)—then they will be unavoidably the effects and creatures of God, the Supreme.

This implies that, aside from these intellectual forms, the divine existence at the station of His essence does not possess knowledge of His creatures and He has created these forms without any knowledge!

Moreover, the knowledge obtained through intellectual forms will be acquired knowledge. The establishment of such knowledge for God, the Supreme, would imply the establishment of a mind in the divine essence, while mind and acquired knowledge are specific to souls attached to matter.

2. The position of the Illuminationists (Isharqiyyin) is based on the idea that divine knowledge of

creatures is the same as their existence, and the relation of creatures to the divine essence is like the relation of mental forms to the soul, whose existence is the same as the knowledge of them.

Although this position does not imply relating acquired knowledge to God, the Supreme, with the previous position it shares the difficulty of the denial of detailed divine knowledge at the station of essence.

3. The position of Sadr al-Muta'allihin is based on the idea that knowledge of the essence is identical to presentational knowledge of creatures. The most important principle for the explanation of this position is the principle of the specific gradation of existence, according to which the existence of an effect is considered to be the radiance and unveiling of the existence of the cause, and the existence-granting cause in its own essence possesses the perfection of its effects, therefore, the presence of the essence to itself will be identical to their presence.

However, he believes that there can be no direct knowledge of material existence, and just as immateriality is the condition for being a knower, it is also a condition for being known in essence (ma'lum bil-dhat).

But as was indicated in Lesson Forty-Nine, the hiddenness of spatial and temporal parts of material entities from one another does not contradict the presence of all of them for their existence-granting cause.¹ Therefore, God, the Supreme, possesses presentational knowledge of all creatures, including immaterial and material ones, a knowledge which is the same as His sacred essence.

A point which should be mentioned here is that there is no way for time and space to enter into the arena of divine holiness. The sacred divine existence encompasses all times and spaces, and in relation to Him, past, present and future are the same.

Therefore, just as the priority of His existence to creatures cannot be considered as a kind of temporal priority, the priority of His knowledge to the existence of creatures cannot be considered to be a temporal priority. Rather, what is meant by the priority of His knowledge is an eternal priority (taqaddum sarmadi), just as the existence and knowledge of other immaterial things in relation to the material world have a perpetual priority (taqaddum dahri).²

Power

An existent which lacks certain perfection cannot give it to another; in other words, the production of an action by an agent which does not have ontological homogeneity (sinkhiyyat) with it is impossible. But the production of an action by an agent which possesses its perfection will be possible, and in the case of such an agent it is said that it possesses the power and ability for performing the action (i.e., the power of agency (quwwah f'ili)).

When this concept is restricted to a living agent (possessing consciousness and will) and these are

limited to voluntary agents (intentional agents, providential agents, agents by agreement, and agents by self-disclosure), the concept of power is obtained.

Therefore, power means a living voluntary agent being the origin (mabda'iyat) of its actions. If such an agent possesses infinite perfections, it will possess infinite power. Given this analysis, there is no need for another demonstration to establish the infinite power of the sacred divine essence.

According to this explanation, power is a graded concept whose instances possess different levels. This concept includes the power of animals, men, completely immaterial entities, and the power of God, and the same goes for the concepts of existence, life and knowledge, etc., which were previously mentioned.

It was previously indicated that the application of these kinds of concepts to God, the Supreme, does not mean that the concomitants (lawazim) of their imperfect instances are also established for the sacred divine essence. Rather, the concepts should be abstracted in such a way that these concomitants are omitted.

For example, the power of animals and men to perform their voluntary actions (i.e., agency (mabda'iyat fili)) is conditioned by idea (tasawwur), assertion (tasdiq), and the appearance of psychological motivation for the performance of the act. However, these sorts of cases are inseparable attributes of souls attached to matter, and none of these things acquired knowledge, idea, assertion and motive are found in addition to essence at the station of completely immaterial entities, especially the divine Being.

However, that which is valid in all cases of power is the existence of knowledge and love in their general senses, the highest instances of which are the knowledge and love which are identical to the sacred divine essence.

A point that must be mentioned here is that the establishment of power for God, the Supreme, requires the affirmation of volition, for power, as was indicated, implies knowledge and volition, and is restricted to living voluntary agents. It was explained in Lesson Thirty-Eight that the highest level of volition is specific to the sacred divine essence which is not influenced by any internal or external factor.

Another point is that the power of God is infinite, and includes all contingent beings, but being within the power of God does not imply occurrence, and the only things which occur are those whose creation is willed.

In other words, the meaning of the Omnipotent (qadir) is not that He performs everything He is able to do; rather, it means that He performs everything He wants to do. Therefore, essentially impossible things are outside the ambit of things His power can bring about. The question of whether the power of God covers these things is incorrect.

On the other hand, not all the things within His power will be subjects of the Divine Will to be brought into existence. Hence, the domain of the objects of His will and of existence will be smaller than that of the

objects of His power. However, the reason why the Divine Will does not cover some contingents will be clarified in future chapters.

[1.](#) Cf., Lesson Forty-Nine.

[2.](#) Cf., Lesson Forty-Three

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