

Lesson 6: What is Philosophy?

The Relation between Subjects and Problems

We have thus far become acquainted with various philosophical terms, and now it is time to clarify the subject of discussion of this book, and to explain what we mean by philosophy and what problems are to be discussed in this book. Before defining philosophy and giving a brief introduction to its problems, it is good to provide some further explanation about “subject”, “problem” and “principles” of the sciences and the relations among them.

In the previous lessons we said that the term “science” according to four of the five mentioned meanings is applied to a collection of propositions which are considered to be interrelated. Furthermore, it became clear that different relations distinguish the separate sciences.

It has also become evident that the best relation among different problems to be considered as a standard for distinguishing among the sciences is the relevance among their subjects, that is, the problems whose subjects comprise the parts of a whole or the particulars of a universal take the form of a single science.

Therefore, the problems of a science consist of propositions whose subjects are under the umbrella of an inclusive topic (whole or universal). The subject of a science is that very inclusive topic which embraces the subjects of its problems.

Here we had better mention that it is possible for a topic to be the subject of two or more sciences, and that the differences among them may be due to their goals or methods of research. However, another point must not be overlooked, which is that sometimes a topic which is considered for the subject of a science is not absolutely the subject of that science, and in reality it has a specific restriction, and the differences among these restrictions for a single subject causes the appearance of several sciences and the differences among them.

For example, “matter”, with regard to its internal composition and characteristics related to synthesis and

analysis of elements becomes the subject of the science of chemistry, and with regard to its outward changes and the characteristics appropriate to them it becomes the subject of the science of physics.

Another example is “word”, which with regard to changes which occur in its construction becomes the subject of the science of morphology, and with regard to the changes in inflection it becomes the subject of the science of syntax.

Therefore, one should be careful about whether the inclusive topic is the subject of a certain science absolutely, or with specific restrictions and qualifications. How often an inclusive topic becomes the subject of a general science absolutely, and then with the addition of restrictions it takes the form of subjects for specific sciences.

For example, in the well known classification of philosophy according to the ancients, body is the subject of all the natural sciences, and by adding restrictions it takes the form of the subjects of mineralogy, botany and zoology, etc. Regarding the quality of the branches of the sciences, it was indicated that some divisions are obtained by restricting the scope of a subject and by adding qualifications to the topic of the mother subject.

Among the possible qualifications to add to the topic of the subject is “the restriction of absoluteness” (qayd itlaq), which means that in that science principles are discussed which are proved for the essence of the subject generally, or absolutely, without considering any specific characteristics.

In conclusion, it is to include all individuals of the subject. For example, the principles and qualifications are established for body in general, absolutely, whether mineral or organic, whether vegetable or animal or human. In this way one can determine the subject to be “absolute body”, and this sort of problem may be further specified to specific sciences.

The sages have thus specified the first section of physics to cover such principles with the names sama‘ tabi‘i (elementary general physics) and sama‘ al-kiyan (elementary general astronomy), then they specified the groups of bodies for specific sciences such as cosmology, mineralogy, botany and zoology.

This same work can be done for more particular subdivisions of the sciences. For example, the problems related to all animals can be taken as a specific science whose subject is the animal, absolutely, or animal qua animal. Then specific principles may be discussed for each kind of animal in other more specialized sciences.

In this way, body in general makes up the subject matter for the section of ancient philosophy called natural science, and absolute body makes up the subject of the first part of physics sama‘ tabi‘i (elementary general physics). Each of the specific bodies, such as the cosmic bodies, the mineral bodies and living bodies make up the subjects of cosmology, mineralogy and biology.

In the same way, living body in general makes up the subject of the science of general biology, and

absolute living body makes up the subject of a science which discusses the principles of all living existents, and the kinds of living existents form the subjects of the particular branches of biology.

Here a question may be posed as to if a principle is common among several kinds of universal subjects, but does not include all of them, in which science should such principles be investigated? For example, if something is common among several kinds of living existents, it cannot be considered an accidental property of living body absolutely, for it does not include all living existents, but on the other hand, to abandon it to any of the relevant particular sciences would be repetitive. So, where must it be placed?

The answer is that usually this sort of problem is also discussed in a science whose subject of discussion is absolute, and the principles of absolute subjects ('awaridh dhatiyah, essential accidents) are defined as follows: a principle which is established for the essence of the subject before being modified by the qualifications of the particular sciences.

Really, the looseness of this definition is preferable to the repetition of the problem. As in the case of first philosophy or metaphysics, some philosophers have said that in it precepts and accidents are discussed which are established for an absolute existent (or an existent qua existent), prior to being qualified by the qualification of 'natural' or 'mathematical'.

The Principles of the Sciences and their Relationships with Subjects and Problems

We have found that in each science a series of appropriately related propositions and in reality, the proximate aim and motivation for learning and teaching that science are to analyze those propositions that are to prove that their predicates are true of their subjects. So, in every science it is assumed that a subject exists, and that predicates may be proved true of parts or individuals of this subject.

Therefore, before dealing with the presentation and analysis of the problems of any science, one needs to have prior knowledge of a series of things:

1. Knowledge of the whatness and concept of the subject.
2. Knowledge of the existence of the subject.
3. Knowledge of principles by means of which the problems of that science are solved.

Such knowledge is sometimes self evident and without need of exposition or acquisition, in which case there would be no difficulty. But sometimes this knowledge is not self evident and needs exposition and proof. For example, it is possible that the existence of a subject (such as the spirit of man) is a matter of controversy, and it is considered possible that it is a fantasy and unreal, and in such a case its real existence must be proven.

Likewise, it is possible for there to be some doubt about the principles on the basis of which the problems of a science are solved, and so it is necessary that these principles are first proven, otherwise the conclusions which are derived from them will not have scientific value and certainty.

These sorts of matters are called “the principles of the sciences” (mabadi ‘ulum), and they are divided into conceptual (tasawwur i) principles and assertive (tasdiqi) principles.

The conceptual principles which consist of the definitions and expositions of the whatnesses of the things under discussion are usually presented in the science itself in the form of an introduction. However, the assertive principles of a science are different. Often they are discussed in other sciences.

As was previously indicated, the philosophy of each science is really another science which undertakes the explanation and establishment of the principles of that science. Finally, the most general principles of the sciences are discussed and investigated in first philosophy or metaphysics.

Among them, one may mention the “principle of causality” which is relied upon by the scholars of all the empirical sciences. Basically, scientific research is done with the prior acceptance of this principle, for this research revolves around the discovery of causal relations among phenomena, but this principle itself is not provable in any empirical science, and the discussion of this principle takes place in philosophy.

The Subjects and Problems of Philosophy

From what has been said it follows that the best way to define a science is by specifying its subject, and if it has restrictions, they should be subject to exact attention. Then the problems of that science may be introduced as propositions which revolve about the above mentioned subjects.

On the other hand, the specification of a subject and its qualifications depends on determining the problems which are intended for the exposition of a science, that is, it is to a certain extent dependent on convention and agreement. For example, if we consider the topic “existent”, which is the most general concept for a real thing, we will see that all the subjects of real problems come under its umbrella.

If we consider the subject of science, it will include all the problems of the real sciences, and this science is philosophy itself, in the sense of the ancients. The presentation of such an inclusive science is not compatible with the aims of the classification of the sciences. There is no choice but to consider the subjects in a more limited way in order to fulfill the mentioned goals.

The ancient teachers first considered two groups of theoretical problems each of which revolved about its own specific set of issues. One group of them was called physics and the other was called mathematics. Then each of these was divided into more particular sciences. A third group of theoretical problems about God also could be presented, and it is called theology (ma‘rifat al-rububiyah). However, another group of theoretical intellectual problems remains, whose subjects go beyond those

already mentioned, and it is not specified to any particular subject.

It seems that for these problems they did not find any particular name to be appropriate, and since it was discussed after physics it was called metaphysics (ma ba'd al-tabi'ah). The position of these problems in relation to the other problems of the theoretical sciences is the same as the position of elementary physics with relation to the natural sciences, and just as the subject of the former is "the absolute body", the subject of metaphysics is "the absolute existent" or "the existent qua existent", so that only problems which are not specified to the subjects of any particular science are presented under it, although these problems (of metaphysics) do not include all existents.

In this way the specific science called metaphysics came to exist, and later was called "the universal science" ('ilm kulli) or "first philosophy" (falsafah ula). As we previously indicated, during the Islamic era the problems of metaphysics were assimilated to the problems of theology and was called divinity in the general sense (ilahiyyat bi al-ma'na al-a'm).

Occasionally other problems, such as those of resurrection and the means to man's eternal felicity, and even some problems concerning prophecy and imamate also are appended to it, as is seen in the section on divinity in (Ibn Sina's) Shifa'. If all of these problems are considered to be the main problems of one science, and none of them are impositions or digressions, then the subject of this science would have to be considered very broadly.

The determination of a single subject for such various problems would be no easy task. For the same reason, various attempts have been made to determine the subject and to explain that all of these predicates are essential properties (awaridh dhatiyyah) of it, though it has not been very successful.

Anyway, there are three alternatives: either, theoretical problems other than physics and mathematics may be considered as a single science with a single affected subject, or the standards and criteria of their coherence and unity is to be taken as the unity of their aims and ends, or every group of problems which has a specific subject is to be taken as a specific science, including the universal problems of existence, which are discussed under "first philosophy", according to one of the specific senses of "philosophy".

It seems that this last is the most suitable of the alternatives, and that therefore the various problems in Islamic philosophy which are presented as philosophy and hikmat, are considered to be several specific sciences.

In other words, we will have a series of philosophical sciences all of which share a rational method, but we will apply the term absolute philosophy to "first philosophy", and the main purpose of this book is to present the problems of first philosophy. However, since their solutions depend on the problems of knowledge, we must first present epistemology and then we may review the problems of ontology and metaphysics.

The Definition of Philosophy

Considering that philosophy is equivalent to first philosophy or metaphysics, and its subject is the absolute existent (not the existent absolutely), we can define it as follows: a science which discusses the states of the absolute existent; or a science which addresses the general states of existence; or a set of propositions and problems regarding the existent in so far as it is an existent.

Several characteristics of philosophy have been mentioned, among the most important of which are the following.

1. Contrary to the empirical and narrative sciences, the method for solving the problems of philosophy is the rational method, although this method is also employed in logic, theology, philosophical psychology and some other sciences such as ethics, and even in mathematics. Therefore, this method is not particular to first philosophy.
2. Philosophy undertakes to prove the assertions which are the principles of the other sciences, and this is one of the ways in which the other sciences stand in need of philosophy. Hence, philosophy is called the mother of the sciences.
3. In philosophy a criterion is obtained for distinguishing true states of affairs from imaginary and spurious ones, and hence, the main purpose of philosophy is sometimes considered to be knowledge of true states of affairs and the distinction of them from illusion, but it is better to consider this as the purpose of epistemology.
4. The characteristic of philosophical concepts is that they are not obtained from the senses or experience, such as the concepts of cause and effect, necessary and contingent, material and immaterial. These concepts are technically called philosophical secondary intelligibles, and they are explained in the section on epistemology.

In view of these characteristics one can find out why philosophical problems only can be proved by the rational method, and why philosophical laws are not obtained by way of generalizing from the laws of the empirical sciences.

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