

Lesson 7: The Position of Philosophy

The Essence of the Problems of Philosophy

In the previous lesson a definition of philosophy was presented, and it was concluded in brief that this science discusses the general states of existence. However, this is not sufficient to discover the essence of philosophical problems.

Of course, the exact understanding of these problems is achieved when they are in practice investigated in detail, and naturally, the more deeply one delves into them and comprehends them, the better one will know the truth about them. However, before beginning, if we are able to obtain a clearer view of the problems of philosophy, we will be better able to understand the benefits of philosophy; we will proceed with more insight and vision and with increased eagerness and interest.

For this purpose, we begin by mentioning some examples of other problems of the philosophical sciences, indicated the difference between them and the problems of other sciences. Finally, we will deal with the explanation of the essence of first philosophy and the characteristics of its problems.

For every man, this basic and vital question is presented: Is his life ended with death, and after it is there nothing left but the decayed parts of his body, or is there a life after death?

It is clear that the answer to this question cannot be obtained from any of the empirical sciences such as physics, chemistry, geology, botany, biology, and others like them. Likewise the calculations of mathematics and the equations of algebra contain no answers to these questions.

Hence, another science is needed to investigate these and similar problems with its own methodology, and to clarify whether man is merely this physical body or whether he has another reality which cannot be sensed called the spirit. On the hypothesis that there is a spirit, is it able to persist after death or not?

It is obvious that the investigation of this sort of problem is not possible by the methods of the empirical sciences. Rather, one should use rational methods to solve such problems. Naturally, another science is

needed to investigate such nonempirical problems. This is 'ilm al-nafs, or philosophical psychology.

Likewise, other problems, such as those of the will, and volition which are the basis of human responsibility, must be established in this science. The existence of such a science and the value of the ways of solving problems presented in it depend upon the proof of the existence of the reason and the value of rational knowledge.

Therefore, another science is needed to investigate the sorts of knowledge and to evaluate them until it becomes known what intellectual perceptions are, and what value they may have, and what problems they can solve. This is also another philosophical science called epistemology.

Regarding the practical sciences, such as morals and politics, there are also basic and important problems which the empirical sciences cannot solve, including the recognition of the truth of moral good and evil, virtue and vice, and the standards for determining and distinguishing praiseworthy and blameworthy deeds. Inquiry into this sort of question needs a specific philosophical science or sciences, which in turn are in need of epistemology.

With more careful attention it becomes clear that these problems are interrelated, and as a whole are related to the problems of theology, the study of the God Who has created the body and spirit of man and all existents of the world; the God Who manages the cosmos with a special order; the God Who causes people to die and again will raise them to life to be rewarded or punished for their good and bad deeds, good and bad deeds which are performed with volition and free will, etc.

Knowledge of God the Almighty and His attributes and deeds form a series of problems which will be investigated in the science of theology (divinity in the specific sense). All of these problems are based on a series of more general and more universal problems, whose scope also embraces sensory and material affairs, such as the following.

Existents are in need of one another for their generation and persistence, and among them there are passive and active relations, actions and reactions, and causes and effects. All existents which are within the range of man's sense and experience are perishable, but there must be another existent which is imperishable, and rather for which nothingness and imperfection are barred.

The arena of being is not restricted to material and sensible existents, nor is it restricted to changing, altering and moving existents, rather there are other kinds of existents which do not have these characteristics and are not in need of time and place.

The discussion about whether change, alteration, perishability and dependency are implications of being, in other words whether there is a stable, fixed, imperishable and independent existent, is a discussion whose positive resolution leads to a classification of existents into the material and the immaterial, the stable and changing, the Necessary Existence and contingent existence, etc.

Until this sort of problem is solved, for example, until necessary existence and immaterial existences are established, sciences such as theology, philosophical psychology and the like will have no basis or foundation. It is not only the solution to such problems which requires rational argument, but if one wishes to disprove these matters this also requires the employment of rational methods, for just as sensation and experience by themselves are unable to prove these things, they are also unable to disprove or deny them.

In this way, it has become clear that there is a series of important and basic problems for man which cannot be answered by any of the specific sciences, not even by the specific philosophical sciences. There must be another science by which to inquire into them, and this is metaphysics, the general science, first philosophy whose subject is not specific to a kind of existent or determined and particular essence.

Inevitably, its subject must be the most universal concept which is applicable to all real and objective things, and this is the term “existent”. Of course, what is meant is not existent in that respect in which it is material, and not in that respect in which it is immaterial, but rather in that respect in which it is an existent, that is, the absolute existent, or existent in so far as it is an existent. Such a science has the position of being what is called “the mother of the sciences”.

[The Principles of Philosophy](#)

In the previous lesson it was said that before beginning to solve the problems of any science, one should recognize the principles of that science. So, we may now ask, “What are the principles of philosophy?” “And in what science should these be determined?”

The answer is that the recognition of the conceptual principles of the sciences, that is, the knowledge of the concept and essence of the subject of the science, and the concepts of the subjects of the problems of the science usually are obtained in that very science itself. In this way, the definition of the subject is presented in the introduction to the text, and the definitions of the particular subjects of the problems are defined in the introductions to each discussion.

However, the subject of philosophy (existent) and its concept are self-evident and in no need of definition. Therefore, philosophy has no need for these conceptual principles. However, the subjects of its problems, as in other sciences, are defined at the beginning of every discussion.

The assertive principles of the sciences are divided into two groups: one is the affirmation of the existence of the subject, and the other is the principles which are employed for the establishment and determination of the problems of the science.

However, the existence of the subject of philosophy has no need of being established, for the principle of being is self-evident, and is undeniable by any rational person. At least every one is aware of the

existence of themselves, and this suffices for knowing that the concept of “existent” has an instance.

Hence, other instances may be discussed and investigated. In this way a problem appears for philosophy about which the sophists, skeptics and idealists on the one hand, and other philosophers on the other hand have disagreed.

As for the second group of assertive principles, that is the principles which are the basis for solving problems, these are divided into two groups: one is the theoretical principles (i.e., not self-evident), which must be proved in another science, and are called the conventional principles, and as was previously indicated the most general conventional principles are established in first philosophy, that is, some of the philosophical problems are used to establish the conventional principles of other sciences.

First philosophy itself basically has no need for such conventional principles, although it is possible that in other philosophical sciences, such as theology, philosophical psychology, and ethics, principles may be employed which are established in first philosophy or in some other philosophical science, or even in an empirical science.

The second group of principles is self-evident propositions which have no need to be proven or explained, such as the proposition of the impossibility of a contradiction. The problems of first philosophy need nothing more than such principles, and these principles do not need to be proven, let alone to be proven in another science.

Therefore, first philosophy has no need for any other science, whether rational or empirical or narrative. This is one of the most important characteristics of this science, although logic and epistemology are exceptions, because the reasoning for the establishment of philosophical problems is on the basis of the principles of logic, and it is on this basis that philosophical truths are capable of being known rationally, that is, the existence of the intellect and its ability to solve the problems of philosophy be settled.

But it may be said that what is basically needed by philosophy are the self-evident principles of logic and epistemology, which cannot really be considered “problems” and to be in need of proving, and the explanation which are given of them are really explanations for admonition. Further explanation of this is to be found in Lesson eleven.

The Aim of Philosophy

The proximate and immediate aim of any science is the awareness of man of the problems which are presented in that science, and the quenching of man’s innate thirst for understanding the truth. For one of the basic human instincts is the instinct to search for the truth or unquenchable limitless curiosity.

The satisfaction of this instinct fulfills one of man’s psychological needs, although this instinct is not equally active and animated in all individuals, but in no individual is it completely dormant and ineffective.

Normally every science has indirect benefits and consequences which somehow influence man's material and spiritual life and fulfills man's other natural and innate desires. For example, the natural sciences prepare the ground for the greater exploitation of nature and a better material life, and are related by a single intermediary to man's natural and animal life.

The mathematical sciences are two removes from these aims, although they may also have influence in another way on the spiritual life and human dimension of man, and this is when they are mingled with knowledge of philosophy and divinity and gnostic ('irfani) attention of the heart, and when they present them phenomena of nature in the form of effects of the power, greatness, wisdom and mercy of God.

The relation of the spiritual and human dimensions of man to the philosophical sciences is closer than the relation to the natural sciences, and, as was indicated, the natural sciences are also related to the human dimension of man with the aid of the philosophical sciences. This relation is manifested in theology and then in philosophical psychology and ethics more than in others.

For divine philosophy acquaints us with God, the Supreme, and we become aware of the attributes of beauty and majesty, which prepares the ground for our relation to the source of infinite knowledge, power and beauty.

The philosophical science of the soul ('ilm al-nafs) facilitates knowledge of the spirit and its attributes and characteristics, and makes us aware of the essence (jawhar) of humanity, and extends our vision in relation to the truth of our own selves, and leads us beyond nature and beyond the limited bounds of time and place, and it brings us to understand that man's life is not limited and restricted to narrow dark framework of worldly and material life. Ethics and morals show the general way to the adornment and trimming of the spirit and heart, and the acquisition of eternal felicity and ultimate perfection.

As was previously indicated, in order to obtain all of this valuable knowledge, the problems of epistemology and ontology must be solved. Hence, first philosophy is the key to these precious and unending treasures which promise felicity and eternal benefits. It is the blessed root of the "good tree" which produced the fruits of various spiritual and intellectual virtues and boundless spiritual and divine perfections. It plays the largest role in preparing the ground for human perfection and sublimity.

In addition to this, philosophy provides worthy help with the avoidance of satanic temptations and the rejection of materialism and atheism. It safeguards one from intellectual perversions, lapses and deviations. It provides one with undefeatable arms in the arena of the combat of ideas. It enables one to defend correct views and tendencies and to attack and charge invalid and incorrect thoughts.

Therefore, in addition to playing a positive and uniquely constructive role, philosophy also has an irreplaceable defensive and combative role. In the expansion of Islamic culture and the destruction of anti-Islamic cultures, it is highly effective.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/philosophical-instructions-muhammad-taqi-misbah-yazdi/lesson-7-position-philosophy>