

Lesson 9: The Relation between Philosophy and the Sciences

The Relations among the Sciences

Although the sciences, in the sense of collections of appropriate problems, are separated and distinguished from one another according to different criteria, such as their subjects, aims, and methods of inquiry, they are still related to one another. Each of them is able, to some extent, to assist with the solution of the problems of another science.

As was previously indicated, mostly, the positive principles of every science are presented in another science, and the best example of the benefit given to one science by another can be found in the relation between mathematics and physics.

The relations among the philosophical sciences are also clear, and the best example of this can be found in the relation between morals and philosophical psychology, for one of the positive principles of the science of morals is the possession of will and freedom of man without which moral goodness and evil, praise and blame and reward and punishment would be meaningless.

This positive principle must be established in the philosophical psychology (*'ilm al-nafs*), which discusses the characteristics of the human soul by the rational method. There is more or less of a relation between the natural and philosophical sciences, as well. In order to solve some problems which are raised in the philosophical sciences, one can employ premises which are established in the empirical sciences.

For example, in empirical psychology it is demonstrated that sometimes despite the existence of necessary physical and physiological conditions for seeing and hearing, perception does not take place. Perhaps all of us have had the experience of meeting a friend but failing to see him because the focus of our mental attention was elsewhere, or a sound may have caused our eardrums to vibrate although we did not hear it.

This subject can be used for premises to solve one of the problems of the philosophical science of the soul, and it may be concluded that perception is not simply due to the category of material interaction, otherwise perception would always take place when the material conditions were satisfied.

Now the question may be raised as to whether such relations also obtain between philosophy (i.e., metaphysics) and the other sciences, or whether there is an impenetrable wall and no relation between them.

In response it must be said that there are relations between philosophy and the other sciences, although philosophy is not dependent on the other sciences, and even has no need for positive principles which are established in other sciences. On the one hand, it assists other sciences and satisfies some of their fundamental needs, while on the other hand, it benefits from the other sciences in one sense.

We shall now briefly investigate the interrelations between philosophy and the sciences in two sections.

The Assistance given by Philosophy to the Sciences

The fundamental assistance given by philosophy (i.e., metaphysics) to the other sciences, including the philosophical and non-philosophical sciences, is confined to explaining their assertive principles, that is, the establishment [of the existence] of non-self-evident subjects and the establishment of the most general positive principles:

A. The establishment of the subject of science. We know that the problems of every science turn about a subject which includes the subjects of the problems of that science. When such the existence of such a subject is not self-evident, it needs to be established, and this establishment is not within the scope of the problems of that science, for the problems of every science are limited to propositions which represent the states and accidents of the subject, not its existence.

On the other hand, in some cases, the establishment of a subject by means of the research methods of that science is not possible. For example, the methods of the natural sciences are empirical, but the real existence of their subjects must be established by the rational method.

In such cases, it is only first philosophy which can assist these sciences and establish their subjects by rational proof. This relation between philosophy and the sciences has been considered by some authorities to be a general relation, and that all the sciences without exception are in need of philosophy for the establishment of their subjects, and some have even gone further to assert that the establishment of the existence of all things is the responsibility of metaphysics.

Every proposition which has the form of a haliyyah basitah (simple existential proposition), that is one whose predicate is "existent", such as "Man is existent," is considered to be a metaphysical proposition.

The apparent meaning of this claim, however, seems to be an exaggeration, but there is no doubt that

the non-self-evident subjects of the sciences are in need of proofs which are composed of universal and metaphysical premises.

B. Establishing positive principles. As has been repeatedly indicated, the most general principles required by all the real sciences are discussed in first philosophy, and the most important of them is the principle of causality and its subordinate laws, which we explain as follows:

All scientific endeavors turn about the discovery of causal relations between things and phenomena. A scientist who spends long years of his life in the laboratory to analyze and synthesize chemicals searches to discover what elements cause the appearance of what material, and what properties and accidents will appear in it, and what factors cause the analysis of compounds, that is, what is the cause for the appearance of these phenomena?

Likewise, a scientist who sets up an experiment to discover the microbe which causes a disease and the medicine for it really is searching for the cause of that disease and its cure.

Hence, scientists, prior to beginning their scientific endeavors, believe that every phenomenon has a cause, and even Newton, who discovered the law of gravity, by observing the falling of an apple, was blessed by this same belief. If he had imagined that the appearances of phenomena are accidental and without a cause, he would never have been able to make such a discovery.

Now the question is: In what science is this very principle which is required by physics, chemistry, medicine and other sciences to be investigated? The answer is that the investigation of this rational law is not appropriate to any science but philosophy.

Likewise, the subordinate laws of causation, such as the law that every effect has a specific and suitable cause, for example, the roaring of a lion in the jungles of Africa does not cause a man to be afflicted with cancer, and the singing of a nightingale in Europe would not cure him.

Also the explanation of these and the following laws are worthy of no science but philosophy: the law that wherever a complete cause occurs, its effect will also necessarily come into existence, and until a complete cause occurs, its effect will never be existent.

After their experiments, scientists remain in need of the principle of causality, for the immediate results of their experiments are nothing but the fact that in the cases tested specific phenomena have occurred simultaneously or following other phenomena.

The discovery of a universal law, and the claim that this cause always brings about the appearance of certain effects, requires another principle which can never be obtained by experimentation.

The correct view is that this principle is the very principle of causation, that is, a scientist can present a universal law with certainty only when he has been successful in discovering the common factor in all cases, and he has found the existence of the cause of phenomena in all the cases tested. In this way it

may be said that whenever and wherever such a cause occurs, the phenomenon of its effect will come into existence.

Also, this law can be accepted in a universal form which admits no exceptions only when the law of the necessity of causation is accepted; otherwise, it may be considered possible that the existence of the complete cause does not always necessitate the appearance of its effect, or that the occurrence of the appearance of the effect is possible without the existence of its complete cause. In this way, the universality and necessity of the above mentioned law would be flawed, and its certainty would be lost.

Of course, the discussion about whether experience can discover the complete and exclusive cause of a phenomenon is another matter, but in any case, the necessity and certainty of a universal law (given that such laws can be discovered in the natural sciences by empirical methods) depends on the acceptance of the principle of causation and its corollaries.

The proof of these laws is part of the assistance given by philosophy to the sciences.

The Assistance given by the Sciences to Philosophy

The most important assistance given by the sciences to philosophy takes two forms:

A. The demonstration of the premises of some proofs. At the beginning of this lesson we indicated that sometimes in order to solve some problems of the philosophical sciences empirical premises can be used. For example, from the absence of the occurrence of perception despite the existence of material conditions the conclusion may be drawn that perception is a non-material phenomenon.

Likewise in order to establish the existence of the spirit one may employ the biological fact that the cells of the bodies of men and animals gradually die and are replaced by other cells so that during several years all the cells of the body (except the cells of the brain) are replaced, and by adding the fact that the structure of the cells of the brain also gradually change with the consumption of their contents and renewed nourishment, for individual unity and the persistence of the spirit are cases of consciousness and are undeniable.

The body, however, is constantly in a state of change. Hence, it becomes clear that the spirit is other than the body, is persistent and unchangeable. Even in some proofs of the existence of God the Exalted, such as the proof from motion and the proof from creation, in one sense, empirical premises are used.

Now, regarding this relation which exists between the natural and philosophical sciences, the relation between them and metaphysics can be established in this way, in order to solve a metaphysical problem, such as, that existence is not equivalent to matter, and that being material is not a characteristic of all of being and is not an accident of all existents.

In other words existence may be divided into the material and the non-material, for this a premise may

be employed that, for example, is obtained from philosophical psychology, and its establishment, in turn, will all be accomplished with the assistance of the empirical sciences.

Also, in order to establish the fact that dependence is not an inseparable implication of being and that there is an independent existent (the Necessary Existent), the proofs from motion and from creation are used, which are based on empirical premises.

This relation between the natural sciences and philosophy does not contradict that which was explained before, that philosophy is not in need of the other sciences, for the way of establishing the mentioned facts is not limited to these kinds of proofs, and for each of them there are proofs of pure philosophy, which are composed of primary self-evident premises and those given by consciousness (propositions which refer to presentational knowledge), as will be explained in the appropriate place, God willing.

In reality, the setting forth of proofs consisting of empirical premises is for the sake of the indulgence of those whose minds are not sufficiently trained to completely understand pure philosophical proofs, which are composed of pure rational premises which are far from the mind familiar with sensory affairs.

B. Preparing new grounds for philosophical analysis. Every science begins with a number of basic and universal problems, and they develop in order to elaborate and explain specific and particular cases with the appearance of new fields which sometimes appear with the aid of other sciences.

Philosophy is no exception to this rule, and its first problems are limited, and it has developed and will develop with the appearance of wider horizons, horizons which sometimes are discovered by mental efforts and the exchange of ideas and thoughts, and sometimes through the guidance of revelation, or by gnostic disclosures, and sometimes they appear by means of things which are established in other sciences, which prepare the ground for comparison with other philosophical principles and new rational analyses, such as the problems of the truth of revelation and miracles given by religion, and other problems, such as the world of images and forms, given by the gnostics (ʿurafa).

These have prepared the grounds for new philosophical investigations. Likewise, the progress of empirical psychology has opened up new problems for the philosophical science of the soul.

Therefore, one of the services the sciences render to philosophy, a cause for the broadening of its vision, the widening of the range of its problems, its development and fruitfulness is to prepare new subjects for philosophical analysis and comparison with its general principles.

For example, in the modern age when the theory of the transformation of matter to energy and the composition of particles from compressed energy were presented, a problem was posed for the philosopher as to whether it is possible for something to occur in the material world which lacks the basic attributes of matter, and for example, has no volume? Is it possible for something which does have volume to be transformed into something without volume? Given that the answer to these questions is negative, it will be concluded that energy does not lack volume, despite the fact that this is not provable

by sensory experience.

Likewise, when energy was introduced by some physicists as being of the same family as motion, the question arose as to whether it is possible that matter, which is assumed to have come into existence from compressed energy, to be homogeneous (ham sinkh) with motion. Is it possible for matter to lose its essential properties by being transformed into energy, or with the transformation of some atomic particles into "fields" (according to some hypotheses of modern physics)? Basically, is physical matter the same as the body discussed in philosophy? And what relations are there between physical matter and other concepts, such as force, energy and field, and the concept of body in philosophy?

It is clear that this service rendered by natural science to the philosophical sciences, especially metaphysics, does not mean that philosophy is in need of them, even if the range is broadened for philosophical activity and manifestation with the problems which are raised as an effect of the progress of the sciences.

The Relation between Philosophy and Gnosis ('Irfan)

At the end of this lesson it is good to indicate something about the relation between philosophy and 'irfan, and for this purpose there is no alternative but to give a brief explanation about 'irfan.

'Irfan literally means knowing, and in technical terms it is applied to special perceptions which are obtained through the focusing of one's attention on the interior of the soul (not by means of sensory experience nor by rational analysis), and in the process of this spiritual wayfaring (sayr wa suluk) some disclosures usually are obtained which are similar to "visions" and sometimes there is the exact presentation of something which occurred in the past, present or future, and sometimes it needs an interpretation, and sometimes it appears as an effect of being possessed by the devil.

The topics which the gnostics ('urafa) explain as their own interpretations, disclosures and findings of conscience, are called "scientific gnosis" ('irfan-e-ilmi). Sometimes by adding reasonings and inferences they take the form of philosophical discussions.

There is also an interrelation between philosophy and gnosis which is investigated in the following two sections.

The Assistance given by Philosophy to Gnosis ('Irfan)

A. Real gnosis is acquired exclusively through bondage to God and obedience to His orders. Bondage without knowledge is impossible, and this knowledge requires philosophical principles.

B. The recognition of correct gnostic disclosures is achieved by their comparison with the standards of reason and the (religious) law, and by one or more intermediaries they go back to principles of philosophy.

C. Since gnostic visions are a sort of interior perception and are completely personal, their mental interpretations are achieved by means of concepts and these are then transformed into others by means of terms and expressions, and in view of the fact that most gnostic truths are beyond the level of common understanding, precise concepts and proper terminology must be e

The Assistance given by Gnosis ('Irfan) to Philosophy

A. As was previously indicated, gnostic disclosures and visions raise new problems for philosophical analysis which help with the broadening of vision and the development of philosophy.

B. Where problems are solved in the philosophical sciences by means of rational proof, gnostic visions are considered a powerful corroboration, and in reality, that which is understood by the philosophy by means of reason is found by the gnostic by means of visions of the heart.

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