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Lesson 10: The Necessity of Philosophy

The Man of the Age

The sun has newly risen from its bed of the green waters of the sea, and flashes its golden rays on the sleepy faces of the voyagers of as ship, voyagers who have just awakened from last night's slumber, and who, with minds at ease and unaware of all else, have begun eating and drinking and amusing themselves. The ship, as always, advances through the limitless ocean.

Meanwhile, somebody who seems brighter than the others starts to think a bit, and then turns to his shipmates and asks, "Where are we going?" Somebody else who seems to have been roused from his sleep, ask the same question of the others in wonder, and.... Some are so intoxicated with their enjoyments and amusements that they pay no heed to him, and continue with their own affairs without thinking of answering this question. But little by little, the question spreads until it reaches the crew and the captain. They also repeat the question without having an answer for it. At last, a question mark hangs in the atmosphere of the ship and a strange horror and embracing distress appear.

Is this imaginary scene not the story of the people of the world, who have boarded the great ship of the earth, and while revolving about themselves in cosmic space, they travel through the limitless ocean of time? Are they not like cattle feeding, as it says in the Qur'an:

"They take their enjoyment and eat as cattle eat" **(47:12)**.

And it also says:

"they have hearts, but understand not with them; they have eyes, but perceive not with them; they have ears, but they hear not with them. They are like cattle; nay, rather they are further astray. Those— they are the heedless." **(7:179)**.

Yes! This is the story of the people of our times, who along with the amazing progress of technology have become afflicted with puzzlement and wandering and knows not from where they have come and

to where they are going, and to which direction they must turn, and which path they must take.

This is why absurdism, nihilism and hippie–ism have appeared in the space age. Like a cancer they attack the soul, thought and spirit of civilized man, and like termites eat away at the pillars of palace of humanity and weaken it.

These questions raised by conscious people who have roused the semiconscious have compelled thinkers to seek answers to them. A group of those ready to think correctly have obtained correct, illuminating and orienting answers. They know the true purpose, and they eagerly follow the straight path.

However, those who are under the influence of immature thought and psychological factors imagine that there is no beginning and no end to the caravan, and that there are always ships which appear upon the ocean, and by means of roaring waves are aimlessly pulled this way and that. But, before they reach the safe and tranquil shore, they drown in the sea,

"They say, there is nothing but our present life; we die and we live, and nothing but Time destroys us" **(45:24).**

In any case, these questions are wily–nilly raised for the conscious person: What is the beginning? What is the end? What is the right path toward the aim? It is obvious that the natural and mathematical sciences have no answer to them, so what is to be done? In what way is the correct answer to these questions to be obtained?

In the previous lessons the way to find answers to these questions has been indicated, that is, each of these three basic questions is related to a branch of philosophy and must be investigated by rational methods. All of them require metaphysics or First Philosophy. Hence, we must begin with epistemology and ontology and then deal with the philosophical sciences to find correct answers to these questions and others like them.

Social Schools

Wandering and bewilderment which have befallen space age man are not limited to individual and personal problems, for attendant social problems have also crystallized in various political and economic schools and systems, and although these artificial systems have failed to prove themselves worthy and complete, there are still wandering societies of people who have not given them up, and even those who have been disillusioned continue to plod along in the same deviant directions seeking new artificial systems woven from the same cloth.

Each time a new "–ism" appears in the arena of ideology, a misled group is attracted to it, and a brawl and tussle gets underway. It does not take very long before they fall, broken and unfulfilled until the time when they appear again under a new name, new color and scent to deceive another group.

It seems that these unfortunate misled people have vowed never to listen to the call of the truth and not to listen to words of divine leaders, and they gripe, “Why are your hands empty of the silver and gold and all that glitters in this world? If you speak the truth, why are the white and red palaces not in your control?”

Yes, these are the followers of those whose stories are repeatedly whispered by the Noble Qur’an into the ears of the people of the world. But where are the ears of the listeners?!

Anyway, as an invitation by way of wisdom, one should say: social systems must be arranged on the basis of awareness of the nature of man and all his existential aspects, with regard to the purposes of his creation, and in recognition of the factors which enable him to achieve the final goal. Finding such a complicated formula is beyond the mental capacities of ordinary humans.

That which can be expected of our thought is knowledge of fundamental problems and general foundations of these systems which should be established more firmly and steadfastly, that is, knowledge of the Creator of the cosmos and man, knowledge of the purposefulness of human life, and knowledge of the way opened by the Wise Creator for man so that he may journey and progress toward the final goal.

Then it is time for the heart to turn toward Him, to head down the path and following the divine guides to take firm steps, and without doubt or wavering to fare the way and make haste.

If one fails to benefit from the God given blessing of reason, does not think of the beginning and end of being, fails to solve the basic problems of life, selfishly chooses his own way, and brings about a system and sets his own powers and those of others for its sake, then such a one will suffer the consequences of his own selfishness, foolishness, licentiousness, aberrant thinking and perversities. Finally, one must not blame others for his lack of fulfillment and misfortunes.

Yes! Finding the correct ideology depends on having the correct world view, and until the bases of the world view are firmly established, until its fundamental problems are properly solved and until opposing temptations are dispelled, one cannot hope to find a fair, useful and effective ideology. Until one knows what there is one will never be able to discover what ought to be.

The fundamental problems of a world view are the same threefold questions for which the awakened consciousness innate to man seeks definite and convincing answers. It is not without reason that Islamic scholars have called them the “principles of religion” (usul al-din): theology answers the question: “What is the beginning?”; the study of the resurrection answers the question of “What is the end?”; the study of revelation and prophecy answers the questions of “What is the way, and who is the guide?”

It goes without saying that the correct and definite solution to these questions depend on philosophical and rational ideas. In this way, we are led by another route to the importance and necessity of the problems of philosophy, and prior to all of them, those of epistemology and ontology.

The Mystery of Humanity

There is a third way to come to appreciate the importance and necessity of philosophy which can motivate those who are of extraordinary aspiration and who seek advancement, and it is that the true humanity of man depends on the gains of philosophy, and the explanation of this is as follows:

All animals are known to have the characteristic that their actions are performed with consciousness and will which spring from the instincts. An existent which has no sort of consciousness is outside the realm of the animals. Among the animals there is a distinguished kind whose under-standing is not limited to sensory perception and whose will does not conform to natural instincts, but who has another perceptive power called the intellect, such that man's will takes form in the light of his intellect. In other words, what distinguishes man is his own vision and inclinations.

So, if one limits oneself to sensory perceptions alone, and does not benefit from his own intellectual powers, and his movements are entirely determined by his animal instincts, then in reality, he is nothing more than an animal, or rather, according to the Qur'an, he is even further astray than the beasts.

Therefore, the real man is one who uses his own intellect in order to determine the most important aspects of his destiny, and on that basis comes to know, in a general way, how to live, and then, in all seriousness, he fares the way.

From what has been explained previously it became known that the most fundamental problems facing the conscious human being which play a crucial role in the social and individual destinies of man are the same fundamental problems of a world view, problems whose ultimate and definite solutions depend on philosophical efforts.

We may conclude that without the benefit of that which is obtained through philosophy, neither individual nor social felicity is possible, nor the achievement of the true perfection of man.

The Solution to Some Problems

Regarding these explanations, it is possible that some doubts may be raised, the most important of which will be mentioned with answers to each of them.

Objection 1: These explanations can establish the necessity of philosophy only when the world view is restricted to a philosophical one, and the way to solve its fundamental problems is limited to philosophy, while other world views exist as well, such as the scientific world view, the religious world view and the mystical ('irfani) world view.

Answer 1: As has been repeatedly explained, the solution to these sorts of problems is beyond the scope of the empirical sciences, and therefore, there is really no such thing as the "scientific world view" (in its proper meaning). However, regarding the religious world view, it can only be of use when we know

what the true religion is. And this, in turn, is based on knowledge of the Prophet and the One Who sent him, that is, God the Exalted, and it is clear that basis of the content of revelation one cannot prove the one who sent it or the one who received it.

For example, one cannot say that since the Qur'an says that God exists, His existence has been proven! Regarding the mystical world view, as was indicated in the section on the relation between philosophy and gnosis ('irfan), it depends on prior knowledge of God the Exalted, and prior knowledge of the correct way of spiritual wayfaring, which must be established on the basis of philosophical principles. Hence, all ways ultimately lead to philosophy.

Objection 2: In order for one's efforts to solve the problems of a world view and of philosophy to be worthwhile, one should be optimistic about reaching a conclusion to one's efforts. But considering the depth and breadth of these problems, one cannot have much hope for success. Therefore, instead of wasting one's life along a way whose destiny is uncertain, one had better investigate those problems for which there is more cause for hope of a solution.

Answer 2: First, the hope for a solution to these problems is no less than the hope for reaching an end to scientific efforts to discover scientific mysteries and conquering the forces of nature. Secondly, the value of estimation depends upon more than one factor, that is, its quantity of risk, rather, another factor must be taken into consideration, and that is the value of the outcome, and it is the result of multiplying these two factors which determines the value of an estimation.

Considering that the outcome here is infinite human felicity for eternity, no matter how weak the probability, the value of the estimation is more than the value of the probability of success by any other way whose outcome is finite and limited.

Objection 3: How can one be certain of the value of philosophy when many scholars have been opposed it and there are even ahadith which find fault with it?

Answer 3: Opposition to philosophy has originated from various people with various motivations, however, opposition from aware scholars and impartial Muslims really meant opposition to the set of current philosophical ideas, some of which—at least in the view the opponents—were not compatible with Islamic doctrine. And if there are some credible ahadith in which fault is found with philosophy, it is with the above mentioned meaning in which it is applicable. However, what we mean by philosophical efforts is the use of the intellect in order to solve those problems which can be solved only by rational methods.

And the necessity of this work is emphasized in the unambiguous verses of the Noble Qur'an and honorable ahadith, and abundant examples of these efforts may be observed in ahadith and even in the text of the Noble Qur'an, such as the reasoning about tawhid and the resurrection in the Book and the Sunnah.

Objection 4: If the problems about [the proper] world view are investigated by rational and philosophical methods in the Book and sunnah, then what need do we have for philosophical books and the discussions presented in them, discussions which are often derived from the Greeks?

Answer 4: Firstly, the presentation of philosophical discussions in the Book and Sunnah does not change their philosophical essence. Secondly, there should be no objection to extracting this set of problems and arranging them in the form of a science, as was done in the case of fiqh and usul, and the other Islamic sciences.

The fact that the origins of these discussions are in the books of the Greeks, and even that they have been adapted, does not take away from the value of these problems, as is also true in the case of arithmetic, medicine and astronomy.

Thirdly, in the Book and Sunnah the doubts which were investigated were those which were current in that epoch, and this does not suffice to answer the objections one encounters almost every day from atheistic schools of thought. Rather, according to that which has been emphasized in the Noble Qur'an and the words of religious leaders, rational efforts must be expanded until they suffice for the preparation for the defense of true beliefs and replies to every sort of objection raised against them.

Objection 5: The best argument for the inadequacy of philosophy is the differences which exist among philosophers themselves, and attention to these differences brings about a loss of confidence in the correctness of their methods.

Answer 5: Differences regarding theoretical problems is an unavoidable feature of every science. The scholars of fiqh have differences of opinion about the problems of that subject, while these sorts of differences are no reason for the invalidity of the science of fiqh or the special methods of that science.

Likewise, the existence of differences between two mathematicians about a mathematical problem is no reason for the invalidity of mathematics. Attention to these differences should be a powerful motivation for devoted thinkers to increase their efforts and endeavors, to persist and persevere until they discover more certain results.

Objection 6: People have been observed who have made admirable studies in the philosophical sciences, but with respect both to personal and moral problems and to social and political matters they have weaknesses. So how can philosophy be considered the key to individual and social felicity?

Answer 6: The emphasis on the importance and necessity of philosophy does not mean that this science is the complete cause and sufficient condition for the possession of the correct ideology and behavior which accords with it, rather it means that it is a necessary condition for obtaining a desirable ideology, that is, following the right path depends on knowing it, and knowing the straight path depends on having a correct world view and solving its philosophical problems.

If someone takes a proper first step, but his second step falters or deviates, this is no reason for saying that the first step was also deviant, rather the cause of the faltering or deviation should be sought in the second step.

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