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THE CONCEPT OF EXISTENCE IN TUSI'S PHILOSOPHY

Existence

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The concept of existence has kept philosophers busy for long. Its earliest discussion can be traced back as far as Parmenides, who claimed existence to include everything: «All things coalesce in being no matter how much they differ in appearance». ¹ Under this inspiration Greek philosophical thought is explicitly focused on two fundamental questions: what is? and what is Being? It is the purpose of this paper to examine mainly the second question.²

The inquiry, into what existence is and what its characteristics are, continued through Aristotle's works and was carried on by the Muslim philosophers. Their interest, however, in this question, and their approach to it, as we shall see, was from a different perspective than the earlier discussions of existence. Parmenides, for example, was concerned with the fundamental problem of «the one and the many»: How can being be one and many? Our senses tell us that there are many beings. But when we analyze the concept of being with the aid of our intellect we come to the conclusion that being is one. This, in turn, brings us to infer that being is immobile, indivisible, continuous.

(1) Joseph Owens, «The Content of Existence», *Logic and Ontology*, Ed. by Milton K. Munitz, (New York University Press: New York) 1973 Also Norman J. Wells «Existence: History And Problematic», *The Monist* vol. 50, No. 1 1966.

(2) «Being» and «Existence» is sometimes used interchangeably. There is, however, an important distinction between the two. It has been argued that 'whatever has essence also has existence', and 'whatever is, is a being' Being is also defined as a 'unity of essence and existence'. Here I shall indicate whenever both terms used in different senses. A detailed discussion of this is in Paul Weiss' paper «Essence, Existence and Being» in *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. I, No. 1, 1966.

In the Parmenidean tradition the problem of existence continued to be discussed by both Plato and Aristotle, although a different nuance was given to the problem by Heraclitus of Ephesus. He argued against Parmenides that the only reality is not «being» but «becoming». All things are in constant flow or flux. It seems to be obvious that philosophical investigations into the nature of existence are also directed to solve the problem of motion and change. Their doctrines of being, finally affected their theory of knowledge; for in order to prove that being is one Parmenides denied the testimony of the senses, from which he led himself to the absurdity that the many is an illusion. Heraclitus, on the other hand, rejected the validity of intellect, whereby he thought he could assert that the analysis of being is implausible, and hence everything is «becoming».

Plato proposed to distinguish two worlds in order to solve the problem; the world of being which must be in communication with the world of becoming. This doctrine basically amounts to the thesis that there is, on the one hand, «being» which is determined, and on the other hand «being» which in a certain manner exists but is not determined. Matter, which exists in a peculiar way, since it is eternal, yet, in order to be determined, needs to participate in the «Ideas». And it is this world of being, i.e. Ideas, which confers its primary characteristics - immobility, permanence, constancy, stability, upon the world of becoming.

Aristotle in turn pursued the question - what is being? within the Parmenidean tradition which formulized beings as form. It was also Aristotle who influenced the Muslim philosophers to a great extent not only on the philosophical issues as a whole but on the problem of existence as well. There is a great difference, however, as I pointed out, between the Aristotelian and the Muslim scholastics' discussion of existence in purpose and approach to this study. For in Islamic philosophy, discussions concerning existence did not continue in the Parmenidean tradition, which regarded being as form, whereas in Aristotelian philosophy this influence can clearly be observed. Muslim philosophers generally regarded existence as something common in which all things shared; «the native endowment common to all things in all their dimensions».³ Moreover, the problematic of existence was carried further into new fields as new questions arised: Is existence definable? Is existence a

(3) «Existence: History and Problematic», by Norman J. Wells, The Review of Metaphysics, vol. 50, No. 1, 1966.

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predicate? What are we to say on the so-called essence-existence dilemma? Under these considerations it seems to me appropriate to delay the discussion of Aristotle's doctrine of being, and rather to present its primary assumptions in convenient instances with the discussion of Tusi's theory of existence. I shall primarily confine myself to the question what is existence? and the problems attendant thereto.

What is existence?

Among the proposed definitions of existence Tusi sorts out two of them as the most credible: 1. the theologians defined existence in terms of an existing object as «that which is the subsistent (thabit) particular, 2. the philosophers, nonetheless, offered a definition in terms of predication as «that which can be predicated of». Tusi accepts these definitions in the sense that they provide us with some insight into the concept of existence. But they should not be taken as real definitions, because they are circular definitions. So begins Tusi to analyze these definitions in order to demonstrate that they yield vicious circularity. His purpose, it should be noted, is to disprove the belief that existence is definable.

According to Tusi, both theologians and philosophers use the term 'existent' as an auxiliary concept in the definiens. We may thus restate both definitions as:

1. the existent (object) is that particular which is subsistent.⁴

2. the existent (object) is that which can be predicated of.⁵

Obviously existence is defined in terms of existence. In order to demonstrate this more clearly let us put both definitions in these forms.

1. existent object (wujud) = subsistent object

2. existent object = (object) which can be predicated of.

It must now be clear that both definitions use synonymous concepts to identify existence. 'Existent' and 'subsistent', maintains Tusi, are but words which happen to have the same meaning. Therefore, these definitions give nothing more than some substitutes of the notion attempted to be defined. We naturally have to, in turn, ask what those concepts are, what is subsistent, i.e. existent? This evidently leads to a vicious circle.

(4) Kashf al-Murad fi Sharh Tajrid al-I'tiqad, by Hasan ibn Yusuf ibn 'Ali ibn Mutahhar al-Hilli. This is a major commentary on Tusi's work Tajrid al-I'tiqad. Tebriz 1952, p. 3.

(5) Ibid, p. 3.

Is existence definable?

After rejecting the above definitions Tusi goes on to conclude that existence cannot be defined. Before we examine the argument Tusi develops to prove his position, I would like to make some remarks on the problem of indefinability. First, the idea that existence is not definable was in circulation long before Tusi. Ibn Sina, for instance, argued that «being is recognized by reason itself without the aid of definition (hadd) or description (rasm)»⁶ Since existence is the most general concept, he maintained, it has neither genus nor differentia; and therefore it cannot be defined.⁷ Razi also argued that since existence is the first of all concepts than which there is nothing more universal, it must be indefinable.⁸ Secondly, it would presumably be helpful in our investigation to trace back the origin of the idea that existence is not definable.

As mentioned above, the discussion of existence started as early as Parmenides' attempt to solve the problem of 'the one and many'. He described being as a determinate, limited, circumscribed structure, or form. Aristotle, on the other hand, contrary to Plato, located being in sensible substance, in the forms embodied in sensible substance. He also rejected the Parmenidean doctrine of being on the grounds that Parmenides only proved that «there is one single term which includes everything, not that there is only one thing; for the one term is applicable to many things». (Met. A5, 986 b).

In Islamic philosophy it is universally held as with Aristotle that existence is a) the most universal of all terms, though it is not itself a genus, b) the most substantial of all terms without being itself a substance, c) the most fundamental terms.⁹ They claim that it is because of these characteristics of existence that we cannot define it. This claim is not yet seen in Aristotle's doctrine of being. It seems clear, then, that one has to search for the roots of this assertion in Islamic philosophy; nevertheless, one also has to acknowledge the bearings of the Aristotelian theory of existence on this supposition.

(6) The *Metaphysica* of Avicenna, a translation of the book of *Metaphysics* in the Danish Name; by Parviz Morewedge, (Columbia University Press: New York) 1973, p. 15.

(7) *Ibid*, p. 15.

(8) *al-Mabahith al-Mashriqiyya*, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, Haydarabad 1924, p. 12

(9) Aristotle, see *Met.* B3, 998 b, and 1001 a, Ibn Sina *Met.* in *Danish Name*, p. 3. Razi, *al-Mabahith* pp. 11-23. Tusi, *sharh Tajrid* by al-Shirazi, p. 7.

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By the time of Farabi, among the theologians some controversies around the concept of existence arose. One such controversy was the essence-existence distinction which was not clearly made by Aristotle. Farabi argued that essence implies existence only in case of God. Participating in the Aristotelian doctrine of being, he ascribed existence the three characteristics propounded by the theory; namely, that existence is the most universal, substantial and fundamental concept.¹⁰ Because of this nature of existence, he proclaimed the concept in question cannot be defined.

It was Farabi's conclusion that became archetype in Islamic philosophy. It was fully developed by the theologian-philosopher Razi after Ibn Sina. (al-Mabahith, p. 11-23) Tusi, following Razi, enunciated that since there is nothing better known than the concept of existence it cannot be defined. All attempts, therefore, to define this notion can not be but to provide the meaning of the term itself. We shall now see how he argues to secure his position.

Why is existence indefinable?

According to the logicians, there are two ways of defining a concept. When something is defined in terms of its essential properties it is called an essential definition (hadd); when it is defined descriptively, namely by characteristics outside its essence, it is called description (rasm). Existence, Tusi claims, can be defined neither essentially, nor descriptively. To define it by hadd, in the first place, is to define it by either some parts of itself or by the notion as a whole. The second possibility involves circularity. If the definition is maintained by a part (juz') of this concept, then that part is either already contained in the idea, in which case we are once again faced with circular definition, for this would be nothing but defining existence by itself; or it is not included in the idea of existence whereby we are led to contradiction-in subject; because if the union of the excluded part with the idea of existence does not yield something additional to this concept, existence would then be manifested by a notion completely different from itself; (that is, existence will be identified by that part alone, which is not even included in the idea of existence) but if the union yields something, namely an idea, this composite obviously cannot be a definition of existence, for it will be something different.¹¹

(10) Philosophische Abhandlungen, al-Farabi, Ed. by F. Dietrici in Alfarabi's (E.J. Brill: Leiden) 1890. see p. 66 also p. 57

(11) Sharh Tajrid, by Shirazi, p. 8.

To define existence by description, in the second place, is to define it by some properties outside its nature. This definition, however, depends on the adequacy of the definiens as regards to the definiendum, which in turn depends on the knowledge of the definiendum, i.e. existence; and we are led once more to circular definition.¹²

Tusi also examines a definition which is discussed by Razi. It has been asserted, states Tusi, existence can be defined by affirming or denying reality for an object. This is not plausible because the affirmation of a proposition with mutual incompatibility between existence and non-existence is self-evident, and it rests on conceiving existence and non-existence, for a proposition necessarily depends on the knowledge of concepts it contains for its truth or falsehood. What Tusi is trying to exhibit here is Razi's argument against the belief that one can define existence in a general way by positing that 'everything is either existent, (mawjud) or non-existent (ma'dum)'. But we cannot, Razi argued, confirm this proposition unless we know its content, for concepts precede propositions; and hence, one still has to ask what existence and non-existence is.

One might object to this argumentation on the grounds that since this proposition is rendered as self-evident, the concepts it contained too must be considered self-evident. The concept of existence is, then self-evident, and this fulfils our attempt to define existence. This argument, according to Tusi, is fallacious because the self-evidency of a proposition does not depend on the nature of concepts it contains. This is why we say that the proposition 'a creator exists' is self-evident, contrary to the fact that the creator's being is not self-evident. Likewise, one can pronounce the proposition «hot and cold cannot be united» as self-evident without knowing intrinsically what 'hot' and 'cold' are.¹³

Tusi does not seem to reject these definitions totally; he does not think that they are completely useless. As long as we bear in mind that they are not proper definitions, and that existence cannot be defined, we can accept these definitions. For they provide us with the wide meaning of the concept, and bring before us the wide denotation of existence. In fact, the purpose of those who defined existence was not the position to defend that existence is definable, but rather to make our mind attentive and directed towards this concept.

(12) Ibid, p. 8.

(13) Sharh al-Tajrid, by al-Shirazi, p. 7.

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But there seems to have been left a question untouched by Tusi: What is it to say that existence is undefinable? In connection with this question, what I would like to examine now, is whether the problem of undefinability has any significance, and whether it has any bearings on the metaphysical scheme of existence. But first some remarks about definition is in order: 1. to define a concept is to analyze its content, 2. we can define a word only when we understand it, this brings us to conclude that 3. definition involves intelligibility. Under these considerations one is committed to view a concept empty, that is, void of any content if one renders that concept undefinable. Moreover, he is also forced to view that concept to be unintelligible.

We may thus think that Tusi is committed to view existence to be an empty concept and that it is unintelligible. Some¹⁴ in fact argued that existence is not definable, for definition requires intelligibility, and intelligibility demands essence. This view, I think, is false. As Tusi argues, existence cannot be defined because it is the first of all intelligible concepts which is captured by the mind. We do not, therefore, stand in need of a definition to recognize being. I shall illustrate this point more plainly.

The fact that existence is the most fundamental concept, by which I mean it is prior to all other concepts in the way our intellect conceptualizes it, can be proved by showing how it and the other concepts arise in the mind. At the first awakening of thought, by the experience of sense perception, the idea of existence emerges in the mind. When we see something or perceive it at the first instant without intellection we sense that it exists, and thereafter other concepts are formed. It would, therefore, be valid to conclude that existence arises in the mind as a concept first by the aid of senses; by the very act of an existing object upon our sensorial organs, the object is perceived as existent whereby it is delivered to our intellect to be conceptualized. Man, cannot but be imagined and conceived as existing, only then we form such concepts as a rational animal about it. No universal can be thought of apart from the image of at least one individual. We, therefore, think justice in terms of a just act, and man in terms of an individual, Socrates, for example: It is in this sense that existence comes first and it is the primary concept which is applicable to everything equally. Existence, consequently, is not

(14) Henri Renard, *The Philosophy of Being*, (The Bruce Publishing Company: Milwaukee) 1953, p. 50.

definable, because it is not proper to define it. For it is known by everyone who has sense perception. This is not the case with other concepts, because their knowledge depends on the cognitive operation of intellect.

The Principles of Existence

What these arguments show is that existence is a different concept from others. This can be demonstrated by pointing to the principle features of existence. Before I go on to examine Tusi's discussion of the principles of existence I would like to clarify what we mean by a concept, and how existence differs from other concepts.

Existence does not obviously refer to a class of observable objects with similar properties that we have in mind, which is usually the case in ordinary concepts such as, book, man, wood, statue. Nor does it refer to some common attributes, qualities applicable to particular beings, which seem to be the case for such universals as justice, whiteness. We do not in fact find any quality, characteristics or any property in beings, (other than the fact that they exist) to which the concept of existence refers. Otherwise we must place it in the category of the predicables. It is in this sense that we may correctly identify existence as an empty concept. But the affirmation of existence, that is, the judgement that something exists constitutes the content of existence. It is in this sense that existence has a content and it is, properly speaking, a concept. Otherwise it is not a concept at all for it has no content in the way an ordinary concept does. We do not, for example, know that 'Socrates exists,' thanks to the concept of existence. But we do know that 'Socrates is a man' thanks to the concept of man; because this concept as a universal has certain common features as a content to which it also refers. Existence as such denotes the status of being, whereas 'man' denotes only manhood, which is a property. We may thus conclude that existence is different from other concepts in that its content is comprehended by its affirmation in the real world.

Tusi also agrees with us at least in that existence is a different kind of concept. We shall now see how he maintains the difference of it in his theory of existence. The most fundamental principle of existence, according to him, as it is for Aristotle, is that it is common to all beings. This can be called universality of existence.

It is in this sense that we can properly attribute existence to all beings not as a quality that beings possess but rather as a term to de-

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note their present status. This brings us to the question of whether existence is a predicate, which is also regarded as one of the crucial problems in contemporary philosophy. Our philosopher, Tusi has nothing to say about the problems. But we find some discussions of it in al-Farabi's philosophy. I would like to discuss this point briefly, for it has important implications on the concept of existence.

When existence is rendered as a predicate, it is claimed to be a property like any other universal qualities possessed by individuals. If existence is a quality (property) then nothing could be said to exist unless it acquires this quality. This, of course, will bring us to the celebrated ontological dilemma of universals. We may then dispute or point to questions of the kind; does existence exist? On the other hand if we refuse existence to be a predicate we lead ourselves to an apparent contradiction, for existence is used as a predicate in sentences of the form «tame tigers exist».

Farabi solved the dilemma by pointing out that since the existence of a thing is nothing other than the thing itself, it cannot be a property. This also disproves that existence is a predicate. For a quality or a property used as a predicate in a sentence furnishes new information about the subject. Sentences of the form, «tame tigers exist», therefore, are not informative and hence they are in subject-predicate form only grammatically.¹⁵ It is proper in this case to conclude that existence is predicated of a thing, not as an attribute or a quality but rather it is used as a predicate to express the status of that thing.

It is in this sense that Tusi also claims existence to be universally applicable to all beings. The universal character of existence in Tusi's doctrine does not imply that 'existence' is a predicate in the sense that 'red' is. But existence is common to all things; this can be proved, Tusi claims, by the fact that our mind hesitates about a thing as to whether it is a substance or a quality or whether it is a necessary or a contingent being while we know without doubt that it exists. We may further argue to prove this point by the fact that everything has only one uniformed contrary. Non-existence is shared equally by all nonexistents, existence must, therefore, be shared equally by all existents.

Tusi also maintains that existence is different from essence; other-

(15) al-Farabi' Philosophische -Abhandlungen, ed. by F. Dietrici (Leiden, 1890) p. 90.

wise, since existence is common to all things, everything would be the same. Although the existence of a thing is nothing but the thing itself, yet the existence of it is different from its essence. This is a crucial distinction which implies that existence is one single concept applicable to all beings in any respect whereas essence is a concept which is applied to the necessary characteristics of a thing. It is because of the essences, therefore, we can distinguish things, and it is also because of essences that a thing is always identified as the same nevertheless it undergoes change.

Although the concept of existence is one and common to all things, yet this does not mean that everything has the same existence. Otherwise we would be forced to accept such absurdities as the existence of unicorns or any mythical or mental entities. It is, therefore proper, according to Tusi, to divide existence into two kinds: external existence and mental existence. Anything which exists in the mind has a mental existence; and all beings which exist in reality have external existence. The mental image of a thing; namely, the existence of a thing in the mind cannot, however, be the same as that thing in reality. For the mental existence of a thing is merely a representation of that externally existing thing in the mind. Mind in this case acts like a mirror, which reflects as existing reality.

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