

Some Answered Questions, The Unity of Existence

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The Unity of Existence

Question: What is the nature of the “unity of existence” propounded by the Theosophists and the Sufis, and what in reality do they intend by it? Is this belief true or not?

Answer: Know that the idea of the unity of existence is ancient and is not restricted to the Theosophists and the Sufis alone. Indeed, it was espoused by some of the Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle, who said: “The uncompounded Reality is all things, but it is not any single one of them.” “Uncompounded” stands here in contrast to “composed”—that is to say, that solitary Reality, which is sanctified and exalted above composition and division, has resolved itself into countless forms. Thus, real Existence is all things, but it is not any single one of them.

The proponents of the unity of existence hold that real Existence is even as the sea, and that all created things are like unto its waves. These waves, which signify the created things, are the countless forms which that real Existence assumes. Hence, that sanctified Reality is the pre-existent sea, and the countless forms of created things are its originated waves.

Likewise, they compare this to the One and the infinite numbers, in that the former has manifested itself in the degrees of the latter, for numbers are the repetition of the One. Thus two is the repetition of one, and so on with the other numbers.

Among the proofs they adduce is this: All created things are the objects of the divine knowledge, and no knowledge can be realized without objects of knowledge, since knowledge pertains to something that exists, not to that which is non-existent. Indeed, how can utter non-existence attain specification and individuation in the mirror of knowledge? It follows that the realities of all created things, which are the objects of the knowledge of the Most High, had an intelligible existence, for they were the forms of the divine knowledge, and that they are pre-existent, for the divine knowledge is pre-existent. As long as the knowledge is pre-existent, so must be its objects. And the specifications and individuations of created things, which are the objects of the pre-existent knowledge of the divine Essence, are identical to the divine knowledge itself. The reason for this is that the reality, the knowledge, and the objects of the knowledge of the divine Being must be realized in a state of absolute unity. Otherwise, the divine Essence would become the seat of multiple phenomena, and a plurality of pre-existences would become necessary, which is absurd.



TRANSLATION

Thus, they reason, it is established that the objects of knowledge are identical with the knowledge itself, and that the knowledge is in turn identical with the Essence, which is to say that the knower, the knowledge, and the objects of knowledge are one single reality. Any other conception would necessarily lead to a plurality of pre-existences and to an infinite regress, and indeed to countless pre-existences. And since the individuations and specifications of created things in the knowledge of God were identical to, and completely indistinguishable from, His Essence, true unity prevailed and all the objects of knowledge were comprised and incorporated, in an uncompounded and undivided manner, in the reality of the divine Essence. In other words they were, in an uncompounded and undivided manner, the objects of the knowledge of the Most High and identical with His Essence. And through the manifestational appearance of God, these individuations and specifications, which had an intelligible existence—that is, which were the forms of the divine knowledge—found actual existence in the external world, and thus that real Existence became resolved into countless forms. Such is the basis of their argument.

The Theosophists and the Sufis comprise two groups. One group consists of the generality, who believe in the unity of existence out of sheer imitation and who have not grasped the true intent of the teachings of their renowned leaders. For the generality of the Sufis understand by “Existence” that common existence which is conceived by the mind and intellect of man, that is, which man can comprehend.

This common existence, however, is only one accident among others that enter upon the realities of created things, while the essences of beings are the substance. This accidental existence, which is dependent upon things in the same way that the properties of things are dependent upon them, is but one accident among many.

Now, the substance is undoubtedly superior to the accident, for the substance is primary and the accident secondary; the substance subsists through itself while the accident subsists through something else—that is, it needs a substance through which it can subsist.

In this case, God would be secondary to and in need of His creation, and the creation could dispense entirely with Him.

To illustrate further, whenever individual elements combine in accordance with the universal divine order, a certain being comes into the world of existence. That is, when certain elements are combined, a vegetable existence is produced; when others are combined, an animal existence is produced; when yet others combine, other things come into being. In each case, the existence of things is a consequence of their realities. How then could such an existence, which is an accident among others and which requires a substance through which it can subsist, be essentially pre-existent and the Begetter of all things?

But the truly learned among the Theosophists and Sufis have concluded, after deep consideration of this matter, that there are two kinds of existence. One kind is this common existence which is conceived by the mind of man. This existence is originated and is an accident among others, whereas the realities of things are the substances. But what is meant by unity of existence is not this commonly perceived existence, but that real Existence which is sanctified and exalted above all expression, an Existence through which all things are realized. This

Existence is one; it is that One through which all things—such as matter, energy, and that common existence which is conceived by the human mind—have come to exist. This is the truth behind what the Theosophists and the Sufis believe.

In brief, the Prophets and the philosophers are in agreement on one point, namely, that the cause through which all things are realized is but one. The difference is that the Prophets teach that God's knowledge does not require the existence of created things, whereas the knowledge of the creatures requires the existence of objects of knowledge. If the divine knowledge stood in need of aught else, then it would be like the knowledge of the creatures and not that of God; for the Pre-existent is incommensurate with the originated and the originated is opposite to the Pre-existent. That which we affirm for creation to be among the requirements of origination we deny in God; for to be sanctified and exalted above all imperfections is one of the characteristics of the Necessary Being.

For instance, in the originated we see ignorance; in the Pre-existent we affirm knowledge. In the originated we see weakness; in the Pre-existent we affirm power. In the originated we see poverty; in the Pre-existent we affirm wealth. Hence the originated is the source of all imperfections, and the Pre-existent is the sum of all perfections. And since the knowledge of the originated is in need of objects of knowledge, the knowledge of the Pre-existent must be independent of their existence. It follows that the specifications and individuations of created things, which are the objects of the divine knowledge, are not pre-existent. Moreover, the attributes of divine perfection are not so yielding to the exertions of the human mind as to enable us to determine whether the divine knowledge is in need of objects or not.

Briefly, that which was mentioned earlier is the foremost proof of the Sufis, and if we were to mention all of their arguments and respond to them, it would take a very long time. However, what was said represents the most decisive proof and the clearest argument that the learned among the Sufis and the Theosophists have advanced.

The real Existence through which all things are realized, that is, the reality of the divine Essence through which all things have come to exist, is acknowledged by all. The difference resides in the fact that the Sufis maintain that the realities of all things are the manifestation of the One, whereas the Prophets say that they emanate therefrom. And great indeed is the difference between manifestation and emanation. Appearance through manifestation means that a single thing becomes manifest in infinite forms. For example, when the seed, which is a single thing endowed with the perfections of the vegetable kingdom, manifests itself, it becomes resolved into the infinite forms of the branches, leaves, flowers, and fruit. This is called manifestational appearance, whereas in appearance through emanation the One remains transcendent in the heights of its sanctity, but the existence of the creatures is obtained from it through emanation, not manifestation. It can be compared to the sun: The rays emanate from it and shine forth upon all things, but the sun remains transcendent in the heights of its sanctity. It does not descend; it does not resolve itself into the form of the rays; it does not appear in the identity of things through specification and individuation: The Pre-existent does not become the originated; absolute wealth does not fall captive to poverty; unqualified perfection is not transformed into utter imperfection.

In summary, the Sufis speak only of God and creation, and believe that God has resolved Himself into, and manifested Himself through, the infinite forms of His creation, even as the sea which appears in the infinite forms of its waves. These originated and imperfect waves are identical to the pre-existent Sea, which is the sum of all the divine perfections. The Prophets, however, hold that there are the world of God, the world of the Kingdom, and the world of creation: three things. The first emanation is the outpouring grace of the Kingdom, which has emanated from God and has appeared in the realities of all things, even as the rays emanating from the sun are reflected in all things. And that grace—the rays—appears in infinite forms in the realities of all things, and is specified and individuated according to their capacity, receptivity, and essence. But the assertion of the Sufis would require that absolute wealth descend into poverty, that the Pre-existent be confined to originated forms, and that the very quintessence of power be reflected in the mirror of powerlessness and be subjected to the inherent limitations of the contingent world. And this is a self-evident error, for we observe that the reality of man, who is the noblest of all creatures, cannot descend to the reality of the animal; that the essence of the animal, which is endowed with the power of sensation, does not abase itself to the degree of the plant; and that the reality of the plant, which is the power of growth, does not degrade itself to the reality of the mineral.

In brief, superior realities do not descend or abase themselves to the degree of inferior realities. How, then, could the universal Reality of God, which transcends all descriptions and attributes, resolve itself, notwithstanding its absolute sanctity and holiness, into the forms and realities of the contingent world, which are the very source of imperfections? This is pure fantasy and untenable conjecture. On the contrary, that Essence of sanctity is the sum of all divine and lordly perfections, and all creatures receive illumination from His emanational appearance and partake of the lights of His celestial perfection and beauty, in the same way that all earthly creatures acquire the grace of light from the rays of the sun, without any descent or abasement of the latter into the recipient realities of these earthly beings.

After dinner, and considering the lateness of the hour, there is no time to explain further.