

THE SUFI POSITION WITH RESPECT TO THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS

(A paper read at the 1970 annual meeting of the American Oriental Society in Baltimore, Maryland, and updated in December 2006)

The Sufi position on the existence of universals cannot be discussed except as part of the problem of universals in Islamic thought as a whole. I should like, therefore, by way of introduction, to summarize the positions of the various Islamic schools on this question.

Muslim works on logic distinguish between three kinds of universal: the natural universal (*al-kullī al-ṭabīʿī*), the logical universal (*al-kullī al-manṭiqī*), and the mental universal (*al-kullī al-ʿaqlī*). The difference between each of these is usually explained as follows:

If one says for example, that humanity is a universal (*al-insān kullī*) three concepts are involved: first, the concept of humanity as it is in itself (*min ḥayth huwa huwa*), without regard to whether it is universal or particular. This is the absolute quiddity or essence (*al-māhīyah al-muṭlaqah*) unconditioned by anything (*lā bi-shart*). It is known as the natural universal; second, the concept of universality, which is predicated of humanity. This is known as the logical universal; and third, the combination of these two concepts, that is humanity plus universality, or humanity insofar as universality is predicated of it. This is called the abstracted quiddity (*al-māhīyah al-mujarradah*), or the quiddity conditioned by nothing (*bi-shart lā*) rather than unconditioned by anything (*lā bi-shart*). This is known as the mental universal. It was generally agreed that both the logical universal and the mental universal existed only in the mind. What was in question was the external existence of the natural universal.¹

In the histories of Western philosophy the problem of universals is usually traced back to the passage in Porphyry's *Isagoge* in which he states that he will "refuse to say concerning genera and species whether they subsist, or whether, subsisting, they are corporeal or incorporeal, and whether they are separated from sensibles or placed in sensibles and in accord with them."²

Although no one as far as I know, has traced the controversy over universals in Islam to this passage in Porphyry's *Isagoge*, it is, however, fairly clear that the

¹ See Ibn Sīnā, *al-Shifāʾ*, *al-Manṭiq*, *al-Madkhal*, pp. 65-72; al-Kātibī, *al-Risālah al-Shamsīyah*, pp. 7, 11; *Majmūʿ Shurūḥ al-Shamsīyah*, I, 289-294; al-Urmawī, *Maṭāliʿ al-Anwār*, p. 53.

² See W.T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy*, pp. 422-430; Richard McKeon, *Selections from Medieval Philosophers*, I, 91 (Boethius), 219 (Abailard); Porphyry, *Isagoge*, p. 1 (Greek text), p. 25 (Latin translation).

various positions taken by Muslim thinkers with respect to natural universals do, in fact, correspond to the four alternative answers which can be given to Porphyry's question. These alternatives are, first, that natural universals exist in the mind only and have no existence in the external world; second, that natural universals exist outside the mind as corporeal substances; third, that natural universals exist outside the mind not as corporeal substances but as incorporeal substances placed in sensible substances; and fourth, that natural universals exist outside the mind as incorporeal substances but separated from sensible substances rather than placed in them.

Of these four alternatives the third corresponds to the position of the Islamic philosophers in the tradition of Ibn Sīnā who asserted that universals existed externally as incorporeal substances within particular sensible objects. They argued that any particular substance, such as an individual man, is made up of the universal, in this case humanity, plus individuation. And since the individual man is known to exist and the universal, "humanity," is a part of the existent individual man, it also must exist, although it is not perceived by the senses except as individuated.³

The first alternative, on the other hand, represents the position of the so-called "modern" theologians, such as Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rāzī and al-Taftāzānī, who rejected the preceding argument of the philosophers maintaining that if universals were a part of each particular then it would be impossible to predicate a universal of its particulars because the universal, being a part of each particular, would have to exist prior to the particular and thus would differ from the particular with respect to existence. Since identity of existence is necessary for predication, the universal could not be predicated of its particulars, which is absurd. A wall, for example, is part of a house but exists prior to the house and therefore cannot be predicated of it. Furthermore, if universals, which are single entities, existed as parts of particulars they could then exist with contradictory qualities and in different places at one and the same time. The theologians therefore concluded that universals existed only in the mind.⁴

Porphyry's fourth alternative represents the position of the Ishrāqīs and other Platonists, who maintained that universals existed externally as incorporeal substances, called *muthul*, which were not placed in particulars but existed in the non-material world of ideas, or *'ālam al-mithāl*, completely separated from the world of sense.⁵

These, then, are three of the positions taken by Muslim thinkers in the medieval period on the question of the existence of universals. Let us turn now to the position of the *waḥdat al-wujūd* school of Sufism on this question. One might well wonder at

³ See Ibn Sīnā, *al-Shifā'*, *al-Ilāhīyāt*, pp. 202-212.

⁴ See al-Rāzī, Quṭb al-Dīn, *Lawāmi' al-Asrār fī Sharḥ Maṭāli' al-Anwār*, pp. 53-56; al-Rāzī, Quṭb al-Dīn, *Risālah fī Taḥqīq al-Kullīyāt*, MS Leiden Or. 958(21), fols. 68b-69a; al-Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-Shamsīyah*, pp. 46-47; al-Jurjānī, *Hāshīyah 'alā Sharḥ Maṭāli' al-Anwār*, pp. 134-138.

⁵ See al-Suhrawardī, *Hikmat al-Ishrāq*, pp. 92-96, 229-235, 154-164; Abu Rayyān, *Uṣūl al-Falsafah al-Ishrāqīyah*, pp. 187-208.

first why the Sufis, who base their doctrine not on reason but on mystical experience, should find it necessary to take a position with respect to universals. The reason becomes apparent, however, when one considers that the central doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* Sufism is that God is Absolute Existence (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*), and that, according to the logicians, any absolute quiddity is by definition a natural universal. This means that God is a natural universal, and, if God is to exist outside the mind, then natural universals must also exist in some way outside the mind.

We consequently find that during the ninth century of the *hijrah* in particular Sufi writers frequently took up the question of natural universals and attempted to refute the arguments of the theologians against the external existence of universals. Shams al-Dīn al-Fanārī (d. 834 A.H.), for example, deals with this question in his commentary on al-Qūnawī's (d. 672 A.H.) *Miftāḥ al-Ghayb*,⁶ as does al-Jāmī (d. 898 A.H.) in his *al-Durrah al-Fākhīrah*⁷ and his *Risālah fī al-Wujūd*,⁸ as well as al-Mahā'imī (d. 835 A.H.) in his *Ajillat al-Ta'yīd*.⁹

Although there was general agreement among Sufi writers that the natural universal, Absolute Existence, did exist externally, there was some question as to which of the three alternative positions asserting the external existence of universals was most in harmony with Sufi doctrine as a whole. For example, a cardinal belief of the *waḥdat al-wujūd* school was that particulars and, in fact, the entire physical universe did not exist externally but existed only in the mind. Thus the Sufis could not adopt the position of the philosophers with respect to the external existence of natural universals because that was based on the premiss that particulars really existed externally. Consequently some Sufis turned to the Ishrāqī position on universals and made God a sort of Platonic *mithāl* existing externally but completely separated from particular material objects. This is the position presented by the unknown author of the work entitled *al-Muthul al-'Aqlīyah al-Aflātūnīyah*,¹⁰ which was extensively quoted by al-Fanārī in his commentary on al-Qūnawī's *Miftāḥ al-Ghayb* in support of the view that Absolute Existence existed externally.¹¹

According to Muḥibb Allāh al-Bihārī (d. 1119 A.H.) in a work on logic called *Sullam al-'Ulūm*, other Sufis adopted the position that universals existed externally as sensible substances. The commentators on this work explain that Absolute Existence, in the Sufi view, is the only real existent and the only externally existing universal. Consequently all forms of individuation (*ta'ayyun*), whether genera, species or particulars, exist only in the mind, and what is perceived and sensed as

⁶ See al-Fanārī, *Miṣbāḥ al-Uns bayn al-Ma'qūl wa-al-Mashhūd fī Sharḥ Miftāḥ Ghayb al-Jam' wa-al-Wujūd*, p. 35.

⁷ See al-Jāmī, *al-Durrah al-Fākhīrah*, Cairo, 1328, pp. 254-256; Tehran, 1980, pp. 6-8; *The Precious Pearl*, pp. 38-40.

⁸ See al-Jāmī, *Risālah fī al-Wujūd*, MS Yahuda 3872, fols. 25b-27b; "al-Jami's Treatise on Existence," pp. 239-242, 250-254.

⁹ See al-Mahā'imī, *Ajillat al-Ta'yīd fī Sharḥ Adillat al-Tawhīd*, MS Yahuda 4601, Princeton University, fols. 7b-8a.

¹⁰ See *al-Muthul al-'Aqlīyah al-Aflātūnīyah*, pp. 119-145.

¹¹ See al-Fanārī, op. cit., pp. 182-189; also al-Mahā'imī, op. cit., fols. 10a-10b.

the universe is in reality nothing but Absolute Existence. They further explain that this view is in accord with the actual experience of many Sufis who are quoted as having said that they never saw anything without seeing God in it.¹²

Except for the fact that al-Bihārī uses the word “sensible” rather than “corporeal,” this Sufi position seems to correspond almost exactly to the second of Porphyry’s four alternatives, namely, that universals are corporeal substances.

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¹² See Mubīn, Muḥammad, *Mir’āt al-Shurūḥ*, pp. 165-166. See also al-Ghazālī’s, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, I, 259, and his *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, p. 63 (Gairdner translation, pp. 117-118).

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