Existence (wujūd)—Being (hastī)

The Meaning of Existence (Being)

It is true that in every language all words are not equal as regards the way in which they denote meaning. Some words denote their meanings with great generality and extension of meaning, yet precisely, obviously, and without any ambiguity or doubt. The word ‘thing’ can be used for every object, the highest or the lowest, whether substance or accident, but no-one has the slightest doubt as to the meaning of this word. There are, on the other hand, words that have vagueness in the breadth or narrowness of their meaning, in the sense that we find an explanation or commentary necessary to discover their true, original meanings as they are; and looked at from the point of view of reality and the referents of words in reality, it is also possible that a vagueness arises which has nothing to do with the meaning of the word, but is rather a confusion of reference.

The notion of existence (being) is a notion (mafhūm) which is self-evident, and we do not in any way need a definition or explication to understand it. But should it happen that we come across definitions of existence in philosophical terms (such as ‘self-sufficiency’, or ‘existence is something about which people have information’, or the suchlike), they are entirely lexical definitions (taʿrīf lafẓī wa lughawī), and are not nominal definitions (sharḥ-i ism) or real definitions (ḥadd) or descriptive definitions (rasm).

The Grand Master, Abū ʿAlī b. Sīnā, says in his al-Najāt:

It is not possible to define existence except by a nominal definition (sharḥ-i ism), because all explications and definitions of things are by means of existence, and there cannot be an explication for existence; on the contrary, the notion (mafhūm) of existence is formed by itself in the mind without any intermediary.

1 In the terminology of Sabzawārī, and also in the apparent words of the Grand Master, the nominal definition (sharḥ-i ism) is confused with the lexical definition (sharḥ-i lafẓ), and each is used in place of the other; whereas the nominal definition (sharḥ-i ism) is completely different from the lexical definition (sharḥ-i lafẓ). The lexical definition is only a definition of the word (sharḥ lughawī wa lafẓī) without any mention of quiddity and reality, but the nominal definition is a definition of the quiddity before existence; and after it takes on existence the nominal definition automatically becomes a real definition and a descriptive definition (ḥadd wa rasm).
That Which Makes Existence Known is Neither a Real Definition (ḥadd) Nor a Descriptive Definition (rasm)

In the terminology of logic, the real definition (ḥadd) is the definition of a thing by means of genus and differentia; and the real genus and differentia are grasped from matter and external form. Therefore, only that quiddity which, like a body in the external world, is composed of matter and form can have a real definition and genus and differentia. Now, since real existence is complete-ly non-composite it can have no matter and form, or genus and differentia, and, in consequence, it is never possible to define existence by a real definition. Similarly, existence cannot be made known by descriptive definition (rasm), because descriptive definition is a definition which is made through general and particular accidents, and accidental things are entirely from the class of quiddities, and existence is other than quiddity; rather, it bestows existence on quiddity and makes nothing something. And, just as that which makes existence known is not any real definition nor any descriptive definition, neither can it be any nominal definition (sharḥ-i ism), because there is no difference between the nominal definition and a real or descriptive definition except from the point of view of logic.

Which is Fundamentally Real: Existence or Quiddity?

We mentioned existence in the previous paragraphs only in regards to its being a concept (mafhūm). Now it has to be determined whether existence has complete and fundamental reality (aṣālat), or whether it is only a non-real, mental concept (mafhūm-i ʿitibārī); or whether that thing which gives rise to real effects, and is fundamental, is quiddity rather than existence. And this investigation is known in philosophy as the debate as to whether existence or quiddity is fundamentally real (aṣālat-i wujūd aw māhiyyat) [in the external world as opposed to being a purely mental notion (mafhūm)].

Before discussing this, the meaning of quiddity must be made clear so that that thing which the philosophers discuss as the reality of its fundamentality may be understood. So, with this understanding, we shall proceed to give an explanation.

The Definition of Quiddity

‘Quiddity’ is an expression for a general nature which occurs in answer to a question about the reality of a thing. For example, if a question is asked about