

## What Is Existence?

### Defining Our Relationship with Allah and Types of Existence

#### What Is Existence, and Why Is Understanding the Levels and Types of Existence Important?

If we are asked “What is existence?” our mind might quickly turn to libraries with tall shelves and winding corridors or boring philosophy classes. But the truth is, we ourselves are a part of this existence, and as humans, we have different levels of existence within us. However, we often settle for just “I am” and “I exist,” and of course, we suffer losses because of this. This is because our incorrect understanding of the concept of existence leads to our lack of understanding of Allah as the absolute being and existence. In fact, our view of the concept of existence is a general and superficial one and we often do not distinguish between its different dimensions.

Answering “What is existence,” and understanding what its characteristics are, and what dimensions it encompasses requires setting aside habit. Just like a fish that does not feel the presence of water because of its constant contact with it, understanding existence is not easy for us who have the greatest degree of familiarity and connection with it. We usually understand and connect with our material existence well, but our existence is not only limited to matter and sense. In other words, we exist and have an effect in our other dimensions such as imaginal, estimative, intellectual, and supra-rational.

In fact, by talking about existence, we are not looking for a truth independent of ourselves and the world that surrounds us. This is because existence has a uniform presence but different manifestations throughout the universe. The difference lies

in the capacity and potential of beings, which results in different manifestations. In this article, we will examine “What is existence?” “What are its characteristics?” and “What dimensions and levels does it encompass?”

### **Types of Existence**

The first step to understanding “What is existence” is to understand its different characteristics, the most important of which is being the origin of an affect. In the system of existence, there are different types and forms of existence, which we will introduce with an example.

### **Sensate and Imaginal Existence**

If you have a ring on your finger, normally, other people's connection with this ring is only possible through their eyes or vision. However, you yourself both see the ring and touch it. In other words, your connection with the ring is established through both touch and vision. That means, you feel the existence of the ring through vision and touch, which is the lowest level of existence called sensate existence.

Now, if you hide the same ring in your fist, others cannot see it, but they are aware of the ring's presence in your hand. In fact, the ring they see in this situation is the same as the previous ring, but the faculty that informs them of the ring's existence in this situation is no longer the sense of sight, and the ring's presence is understood through another faculty of existence which is called imagination.

The faculty of imagination eliminates matter, but preserves its shape, form, and size. For example, we memorize our home address by means of our faculty of imagination. What is perceived by our faculty of imagination is a type of existence

that originates an effect. This is because if we forget our home address, the face of our spouse, father, or mother, it means our faculty of imagination is not functioning, and we can no longer live. Therefore, in defining “What is existence?” we have reached another type of existence within ourselves called imaginal existence, which is more important than sensate existence.

### **Estimative Existence**

However, the dimensions of existence are not limited to sensate and imaginal ones. To truly understand existence, we need to explore another type and level: estimative existence. Imagine someone holding a child, kissing him, and holding him close to their heart. We can see the love and affection in their actions, but is this love and affection true? We stated that the sign of existence of a thing is its being effective. When we see people willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of their spouse, children, and country, it means that love, affection, dignity, humility, honor, and similar emotions have effects, and therefore they exist.

But the point here is that this type of existence is different from physical and imaginal existence. This is because it does not have a physical form and shape, and is not general like imaginal things, and depends on something else, and therefore is more detailed than imagination, like love for one's country, spouse, and mother, which belongs to us and originates from us. We call this type of existence estimative. Estimative forms of existence do not have physical form and shape; they are personal and are much stronger than imaginal ones.

The world is governed based on these estimative matters. In fact, desires, grudges, honors, ideals, and earthly loves are all estimative matters, and dealing with them is often very beautiful and enjoyable.

We are willing to spend our lives and wealth for loving someone of the opposite gender, or we are willing to sell everything and sacrifice our lives to save our sick child. But can we see or touch this love, or can we give it a shape?

In fact, one of the characteristics of estimative existence is that it has no size, volume, and shape, but it is real and has an effect. So in answering “What is existence?” we encounter different types of existence that do not necessarily have a physical form.

### **Intellective Existence**

Another form of existence which is higher in level is intellective and scientific existence, which is more honorable, more sacred, more effective, and stronger compared to estimative existence. When a person acquires knowledge and becomes a professor and scientist, no change is made in their volume, weight, or physical appearance, but their knowledge expands. One of the characteristics of intellective existence is that it belongs to countless people. It means that a lot of people can acquire knowledge and become doctors, engineers, or learn newly discovered formulas.

Knowledge has effects, so it exists. With knowledge we make cameras, electricity, watches, spacecraft, airplanes, medicines, etc., but we cannot show knowledge and intellective existence to anyone. Universities develop and increase our level of knowledge to bachelor's, master's, or doctorate. After that, the more we try, the more our existential capacity increases, and we can have more inventions and discoveries in the rational and scientific field. Our cars, computers, and tools have been all products of knowledge, but where is knowledge? Can we point it out with our hands or watch it? In fact, knowledge is in our existence; for example, even if a

scientist's books are lost, he has the ability to compile books again and produce knowledge. Thus, when stating "What is existence?" after sensate, imaginal, and estimative types of existence, we reach the fourth type of existence, namely, intellectual existence.

### **The Meaning of Existence and Non-Existence**

A concept often placed in contrast to existence or being and helps us to understand "What is existence?" is the concept of non-existence. As stated before, there is no such thing as non-existence. Non-existence means nothingness, and nothingness refers to something that does not exist. If nothingness existed, it would become existence! So existence has no limit or end. If we look at the place where we are sitting, we find no point where existence does not exist. Existence is infinite and does not end in non-existence.

It is impossible for existence to have an end or limit. It is like imagining that beyond galaxies there is non-existence. This is because if we say existence ends somewhere, the next question is, what comes after that? Is there something after existence or not? We stated that non-existence does not exist, so if there is still existence after existence, it means that existence continues. In fact, we conclude that existence cannot be limited by non-existence. Therefore, to properly understand "What is existence?" we need to have a good understanding of the concept of non-existence and nothingness.

### **The Innate Characteristics of Existence**

In fact, in the definition of "What is existence?" or innate characteristics of existence, we must state that:

1. Existence has no end in all its forms.

2. Existence is infinite and therefore is only one that has manifested itself in different forms.

So all the objects we see are parts of existence. Therefore, we have a unified existence. If there were two separate existences, there must definitely be a boundary between them. This boundary is either existence or non-existence, which cannot be non-existence since non-existence does not exist; hence, it is existence. If it is existence, then all three exist and their essence is the same. They might have different forms, but they are all existent. For example, there are three different forms of existence between our hand and our mobile phone; hand, phone, and air all three exist but in different forms.

Existence is a unified whole, without breaks or divisions. We cannot conceive of it as fragmented or dualistic. If we imagine two separate existences, there must be something that separates them. Following our earlier point, either this separator is non-existent, which is logically untenable, or it is itself existent, leading to a problematic scenario of three separated existences. This separator again cannot be non-existence, and this vicious circle continues without any result forever. So we conclude that existence is one, infinite, and unique, and this is the second characteristic of existence.

3. The third characteristic of existence is that it has no beginning.

We can see this characteristic even within ourselves. That is, there has never been a time when we did not exist or come into existence from non-existence. Existence has no origin because if there is supposed to be non-existence before existence, we face a contradiction since non-existence does not exist, and something that does not exist cannot have any effects or create anything. And if there was existence

before existence, we cannot consider a beginning for it; since no matter how far back we go, we never reach a point where we can consider it as the origin of the creation of existence. In fact, there is no starting point, existence is eternal and has no origin and creator.

4. Existence has no end. That is, we cannot consider an end for existence. Existence is eternal and everlasting. Suppose you want to destroy something that exists, for example, a building or a structure. No matter how hard you try, this structure is not completely destroyed and only changes from one form to another.

5. All the qualities that we can imagine, from inanimate and vegetative qualities to animal and intellective qualities, exist within existence. We mentioned that existence is infinite; therefore, it has no limit or boundary, which means it is impossible for anything to be outside of existence. If something wants to go out of existence, it must either go to another existence or enter non-existence. Since non-existence does not exist, it is impossible for anything to exit the realm of existence. For this reason, existence is absolutely independent. That is, there is nothing outside of existence that existence needs. If we possess something, we no longer need to have it, or want to acquire it. In scientific terms we call this situation the impossibility of acquiring the acquired. Therefore, if everything exists within existence and is not outside of it, existence is absolutely independent. A university professor never thinks of participation in literacy courses because he does not feel the need, and even if he does, he cannot acquire literacy again because he has it in himself. But someone who is illiterate has such a desire because he feels the lack of literacy.

So up to this point, in explaining “What is existence?” we have realized that existence is infinite and one, existence has no beginning or end, there is nothing outside of existence, and existence does not need anything outside itself.

### **The Scope of Existence**

Existence in all its forms is infinite. That is, material, imaginal, estimative, and intellectual forms of existence are all unlimited and infinite. To better understand this, consider the concept of water. Water is chemically made up of a combination of oxygen and hydrogen atoms, but when we look at it, we recognize it as water, not a number of oxygen and hydrogen atoms next to each other.

In the case of existence, the rule is the same. We consider the infinite existence as existence. Even though we, our surroundings, all creatures, spheres and so on are placed in this existence. The essence of existence is infinite. Being limited is incompatible with the essence of existence, and as a result, we do not have something called limited existence. Existence is infinite in all its forms; that is, material, imaginal, estimative, and intellectual forms of existence are all unlimited and infinite.

### **Discovering the Essence of Allah and the Supra-Rational Existence**

Our understanding of existence, derived from our own being, is what we call Allah, the Most Blessed, the Most High. Allah is the ever-present essence within all things. We come to know Allah through understanding our own existence, and we define our understanding of Allah and His attributes in the following way:

**“The absolute existence that is everywhere, infinite and unique, has no beginning and no end, needs nothing, has no void, and has no pair.”**

So one of the results of the *hadith* “Whoever knows himself, knows his Lord”<sup>1</sup> is that by thinking, reasoning, and practicing, we reach a being called Allah from within ourselves. We were already familiar with these properties and characteristics of existence and have only reviewed our knowledge. knowledge that reminds us of an acquaintance that we deal with daily and is the same as the “*Surah Al-Tawhid*” or God's identity card! *Surah Al-Tawhid* simply tells us what existence is and the Beloved or God that we are seeking; even if we do not know His name, He is infinite in knowledge, power, pleasure, existence, and so on. We are all infinity seekers and desire all perfections in all aspects of existence in an unlimited way. Unlimited wealth, unlimited beauty, unlimited love, unlimited knowledge, etc. The desire for infinity is an inherent characteristic of human existence, and while people may seek to satisfy it in different ways, no one can truly escape this desire. We may not even have any knowledge of infinite existence, but we want Him and love Him.

*Hu* or *Huwa* comes before all other names of Allah, and it means He exists. When *Hu* distinguishes Himself with His names and attributes and manifests Himself, He takes the name of Allah and becomes clear and understandable. Allah is the same infinite existence. We call the existence flowing in all things Allah. So contrary to what common belief suggests, Allah is not a being beyond galaxies; Allah cannot be separated from His creations. Imam Sadiq (Peace be upon him) said in this regard: “Most people accept as Allah someone who is their own creation.” There is no place where the true Allah does not exist. In other words, Allah's encompasses everything

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<sup>1</sup>. “Whoever knows himself, will definitely know his God.” *Gharr al-Hakm and Darr al-Kalam*, p. 588.

<sup>2</sup>, including all electrons, protons, neutrons, and even smaller particles unknown to us.

### **How Is Allah's Relationship with Creations?**

Allah is the same as existence, and the characteristics of existence express the attributes of Allah. If we examine these characteristics, we would say:

- Allah is everywhere and encompasses everything.
- Allah is within all things, but He is not mixed and mingled with them.
- Allah is outside of all things but He is not separated from them.

In other words, we cannot separate Allah and things from each other. Imam Ali (Peace be upon him) said: "He is inside everything without mixing and outside of everything without separation"<sup>3</sup>. This means that God is outside of things, but He has no distance from them. One cannot say that here is the Earth, galaxies, and stars, and beyond all these, there is someone named Allah. God is infinite and has a uniform presence everywhere, but a different manifestation.

God's relationship with things is just like the relationship of our soul with our body. Can we say that we are inside our body or outside of it? If our soul were inside our body, it would reduce if a part of the body were cut off, while the soul is a single entity. It is not outside our body either because if our soul was outside our body, our view of ourselves would be different. For example, we would see it from above or from the front, similar to how we look at other objects.

The point here is that there does not always have to be a container and a contained. Rather, another relationship exists here, like the relationship we have with our

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<sup>2</sup>. Quran, 4:27

<sup>3</sup>. *Nahj al-Balagha*, sermon 184

estimative forms and imaginations. In this relationship, there is no inside or outside; instead, there is a relationship of belonging or attachment. Allah's relationship with the universe is also one of belonging, meaning universe is the manifestation of Allah. Previously, we stated that being outside of existence is impossible; therefore, the idea of God sitting above the heavens creating beings outside of Himself is an impossible idea. This idea is considered to limit existence because a god who is outside of himself is limited.

Perhaps the question arises here that if God has created everything, then who created God? But in fact, God is the one who has no beginning and end. If it was supposed that God was brought into being by someone, the next question would be who brought that person into being, and this question would continue forever. While God is the one who is not brought into being by another. That is, God is absolute and infinite existence that has no beginning, and we referred to this in the attributes of existence.

### **The Essence of Creations**

Earlier, in defining “What is Existence?” we realized that existence and Allah has no outside. Now the question is, what is the relationship of creations with Allah? In fact, creations are the manifestations and reflections of Allah. The Quran refers to creation as the face. Being the face of Allah means that the face of every creation shows a face of God; of course, manifestation is different from essence (*dhat*). For example, if a person makes many changes in his appearance, we may no longer

recognize him, but his essence remains unchanged. Essence is not the same as manifestation and can have infinite manifestations for itself <sup>4</sup>.

As a result, all creations are manifestations of Allah. That is, the faces with which God shows Himself to us. Therefore, wherever we look, we will see the face of Allah <sup>5</sup>. We always face infinite faces of God. Despite this, can one doubt the existence of God <sup>6</sup>? The truth is that the Allah whose characteristics we discussed is beyond doubt. In other words, it is better to say it is not possible to doubt the true Allah.

### **Our Existence Is Dependent on Allah**

We are the manifestations of Allah, and all dimensions of our existence depend on Him. To understand our relationship with Allah, we get help from the relationship we have with our imagination, because our relationship with Allah is like the relationship of our mental existence with us. As we stated earlier, our imaginations have effects and are real. As long as we think about something, we give it life, and when we let go of our imagination, it vanishes in us. This imagination exists, and if we wish, we can bring it forth again.

For example, imagine your childhood home in your mind and now let go of that and imagine your school. Can you imagine your childhood home again? Normally, your response is affirmative because your childhood home is alive in your imagination, but in your actual existence, it has vanished, yet you can remember it whenever you want. As long as we deal with our childhood home in our imagination, we give life to this imagination and make it alive, and this is just like the relationship of Allah

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<sup>4</sup>. "You came out with a hundred thousand looks so that I can watch you with a hundred thousand eyes" (Foroghi Bastami)

<sup>5</sup>. Quran, 2:115

<sup>6</sup>. Quran, 14:10

with us. That is, just as imagination depends on us, we constantly receive grace and existence from the Almighty Allah.

Our existence is granted to us constantly, and if God wills it, there will be no form of us left. In this case, we vanish and return to existence. One of the names of God is the Everlasting. It means that God's grace and attention towards us is permanent.

The creation of God is not mechanical; it is not like a builder who builds a house, finishes the work, and even after the death of the builder, the structure remains in its place. Our relationship with God is different. We constantly receive grace from God, and if God's attention is taken away from us for a moment, we will be finished.

Therefore, God is such an owner and planner.

Everything related to us depends on God's will and grace, and He is even closer to us than ourselves, just as we are closer to our mental existence and do whatever we want with it. Allah's relationship with us is also in the same way.

In this lesson, we discussed "What is existence?" and examined its characteristics. We stated that existence is infinite and unique in all its forms. It has no beginning or end, and the last characteristic of existence is that it contains all the perfections that are conceivable to us and therefore is absolutely independent. Allah is that existence and has all its characteristics. We consider Allah as the flowing existence in all creations which are His manifestations and reflections. Our relationship with Allah is such that we constantly receive existence and grace from Allah. In other words, our existence depends on Allah.

At first, it might seem unimportant whether we grasp the concept of existence or not. We might think it is sufficient to simply know that we exist, without needing to understand what existence truly is. But the issue becomes more important when the lack of proper understanding of existence affects our relationship with the

world around us, leading to misconceptions that serve as the basis for our perspective and worldview, unconsciously influencing our lifestyle, decisions, and behavior.

By having an incorrect understanding of existence, instead of accepting Allah as a wise Creator, who is aware of all the dimensions of our lives and has engineered life based on mathematical rules to achieve the purpose of our creation, we only settle for having a vague and passive God that is the product of our mental imaginations. Due to not knowing the answer to “What is existence and its attributes?” we may even make mistakes in understanding the different stages of life and consider death equal to the end of our life. In fact, the level of our happiness, peace, and meeting the criteria of bliss in this world and the hereafter is closely related to understanding the concept of Absolute Existence or Allah. It is a great loss for us to endanger our entire world and hereafter due to a misunderstanding. Without having a correct understanding of ourselves, where we came from, our current conditions in the world, and where we are going, we will not achieve bliss. Understanding all these things depends on our correct understanding of and answer to “What is existence?” and what levels does it encompass?