

The Supreme Self and Real Ethics

Shuja Ali Mirza

Abstract

In Aristotle's typification of science (*dianoia*) and wisdom into the three divisions of theoretical, practical, and poetical, the first pertains to the macrocosm and objective world, while the second and third pertain to the microcosm and subjective world of humanity. To simplify, only the first two divisions are considered and the third, poetical wisdom, is subsumed in the second, practical wisdom. In traditional or sacred philosophy such divisions are neither separative nor equal and the classification of wisdom is always informed by unity and hierarchy. As such, theoretical wisdom is superordinate to practical wisdom and the subdivisions of both—metaphysics, mathematics, and physics in the case of the former, and ethics, domestics, and civics pertaining to the latter—are in turn hierarchically ordered. The principle and essence of the highest theoretical wisdom, metaphysics, is the Absolute—in particular Its ipseity, or the *Supreme Self*. The prime reality of the highest practical wisdom, ethics, is the perfected human soul, or the *centred self*. The fact that this latter subjective self is nothing but a manifestation or radiation of the objective supreme Self, immediately unites the multifarious divisions of wisdom into a singular totality and ensures their validity as well as their efficacy. Modernity's reduction and compartmentalization of science and knowledge ruptures the totality and endangers the higher sciences such that both metaphysics and ethics are left without substantive content and are open to a disabling relativism cum destructive nihilism.

Keywords: Aristotle's division of science, metaphysics and ethics, philosophy of ethics, ethical relativism, supreme Self, real ethics.

Aristotle divides science (*dianoia*) and wisdom into theoretical, practical, and poetical. This division, like all other such divisions, is open to different interpretations depending on the perspective in question and the criterion used—albeit without this implying any arbitrariness in the least. When the criterion is the creative role of the human soul in the existence and manifestation of a phenomenon or entity, that is to say, when the thing being intellected is considered and it is asked, “did it come about as a result of the activity of the human will or did it come to exist independently of such activity?” the tripartite division of wisdom can be reduced to a bipartite one: theoretical and non-theoretical.

Theoretical wisdom has as its object of knowledge the cosmos that concretely exists “out there.” It seeks to understand the macrocosm and objective world that subsists independently of human volition. In this wisdom the emphasis is on cognition and hence its goal and end is *truth*.

Non-theoretical wisdom—including both the practical and the poetical—has as its object of knowledge the human soul and its effects. This wisdom aims to apprehend the microcosm and subjective world of humanity. It is further divided into two parts. The first deals with the activity

of the human soul vis-à-vis its inner balance and its relation with other souls such as leads to the positing of rights and responsibilities. In this part—called practical wisdom—the emphasis is on volition and hence its goal and end is *goodness*. The second deals with the activity of the human being vis-à-vis his outer effects and his production in the form of arts and artefacts. In this second part—called poetical¹ wisdom—the emphasis is on creation and hence its goal and end is *beauty*. Therefore, in this estimation the entelechy of wisdom as a whole is nothing other than the most intrinsic and animating agencies of truth, goodness, and beauty.

The tripartite division of science and wisdom was explained above in terms of the material cause and the final cause of knowledge. For a more complete understanding, the efficient and formal causes must be in some way considered. To treat of the former it can be noted that the ultimate knower and source of wisdom is God. As such, theoretical wisdom is essentially and ultimately the knowledge of God, in all its senses. The etymology of the word “theoretical” and “theory” confirms this fact. The Greek noun *theoria*, and the verb *theoreo*, [to look at, to behold, to observe; to perceive; to consider, to contemplate], along with the root *theos* [god, deity, divine being], come together in the word *theory* to imply the co-meanings “to contemplate the divine” and “divine contemplation.” God’s Self-contemplation is the absolute and highest form of theoretical wisdom. The lower stages of this wisdom pertain to His contemplation of Himself through His creations, starting from the purely immaterial ones, such as the angels and the intellects, all the way down to the entirely material ones such as the heavens and the earth and all that is in them of physical objects. This hierarchy of the divine contemplative agency can be seen in the sub-division of theoretical wisdom into metaphysics², mathematics, and physics.

To explain the function of practical wisdom vis-à-vis its efficient cause, it is important to note that *praxis*—the root of practical wisdom—is the process by which a theory is enacted, practiced, embodied, or realised. *Theoria*, as we saw above, had to do with divine self-contemplation. The fullness and perfection of this contemplation necessitates its embodiment in “another” knowing and contemplative agent. This agent, or vicegerent, is none other than man who was created from terrestrial matter with God’s “two hands”³ and was given consciousness so that he may come to know God through his good actions and worship.⁴ Moreover, the Qur’an says:

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلٰٓئِكَةِ اِنِّیْ خَلَقْتُ بَشَرًا مِّنْ صَلٰٓصَلٍ مِّنْ حَمٍَٔ مَّسْنُوْنٍ
فَاِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُۥ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيْهِ مِنْ رُّوْحِیْ فَقَعُوْا لَهٗۤ رَسٰجِدًا

¹ “Poetical”, more correctly spelt as “poietical,” is from the Greek *poiesis* (ποιησις) and is etymologically derived from the ancient term *ποιέω*, which means “to make”.

² Also known as the “First Philosophy” or theology in its highest sense.

³ Cf. Qur’an 38:75.

⁴ Cf. Qur’an 51:56.

When your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed I am going to create a human out of a dry clay [drawn] from an aging mud. So when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My spirit, then fall down in prostration before him.' (15:28-29)

It is this spirit-intellect in man that informs his theomorphic nature and makes him a mirror through which God perfects His Self-contemplation of Himself. After having created man, in His own image, God calls his creation "good," designating the practical purpose of man's sojourn in the terrestrial realm. Man's goodness lies in balancing his soul such that his inner faculties reflect the qualities and names of God, who is all-Good.

قال النبي صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَآلِهِ: تَخَلَّقُوا بِأَخْلَاقِ اللهِ.

The Prophet (s) said: Qualify yourselves with the Qualities of Allah.⁵

The natural continuation and radiation of this goodness is that man's soul balances itself in all justice with other creatures and souls in its environment, both local and global—as the creatures are the handiwork of a good God and the souls are nothing but other potential theomorphic "mirrors" that have the ability to reflect and praise Him. This miracle of God's greatest creative act finds its completion in the perfected man and the latter's efforts—as God's vicegerent—towards the perfection and goodness of his terrestrial locale and all those that are in it. This then explains the reason for the sub-divisions of practical wisdom—delineating its formal cause—of ethics, domestics⁶, and civics⁷.

Man—as God's best creation made in His image—in his own turn finds the urge to do on earth as was done in heaven. Hence, in his path to perfection man takes on the qualities of God, albeit in a relatively absolute way, and has the power to lord over that part of the material realm that comes within his comprehension. If God is the all-Powerful Creator of all, man is the maker of tools and artefacts. If the Good God creates in His own image and creates a conscious being that is beautiful, then man in his turn assumes a demiurge by which he produces works of harmony and beauty. This then defines poetical wisdom and the nature of its efficient cause whereby man acts to create and produce, but not independently and for the sake of his own carnal desires, but rather, in line with and by virtue of his theomorphic nature and his mandate as the vicegerent of God on earth.

The hierarchy implicit in the single and unicity reality of wisdom means that the theoretical stands at the apex, followed by the practical, which is in turn followed by the poetical. Within each of these divisions, the sub-division that has the most certainty and sublimity stands at the top, while the one that is most probable and mundane is found at the bottom. Hence within theoretical wisdom, metaphysics is the certain knowledge of the immaterial realities and aspects of being, followed by mathematics which is partially certain and partially probable knowledge of quantities, and at the lower end is physics, which is a probable knowledge of gross material objects. In the realm of *praxis* ethics is superordinate to domestics, which is superordinate to

⁵ Sharh Usul al-Kafi of Mulla Sadra, v. 1, p. 222.

⁶ Or 'economics.'

⁷ Or 'politics.'

civics or politics. With respect to *poietics* the most sublime production of man is that which most clearly manifests his spirit-intellect and is the most nuanced and the least corporeal. This can be identified with speech, which is unique to man, and with the type of speech that is sacred. At its best sacred speech is the incantation and recitation of the Book and revelation; a bit lower is the poetry and lyrics that are of divine inspiration⁸ but human authorship. The lowest type of poetic activity is the one that is most corporeal, that is the plastic arts. Even within this lowest of the poetic activities there is gradation, with the plastic arts that signify meaning and beauty more standing higher and the ones that are of “purely” pragmatic and functional use falling lower. Technology, especially in its modern more profane figuration, can now be seen to be the lowest type of human activity possible. The fact that modern technology is currently given prime importance and in fact determines and colours many aspects of human life bespeaks of an anomaly and a great error.

What is important to note about this hierarchy of wisdom is that it is part of an existential continuum and that the subordinate levels acquire their sufficient reason from the superordinate ones which act as their principles. Hence the human and subjective microcosm finds its sufficient reason and source of objectivity in the objective macrocosm which is itself rooted in the divine. Similarly, truth, goodness, and beauty are all transcendentals that have a universal extension and that are essentially united in their Principle, the One Absolute Being.

The essential unity between theoretical wisdom and practical⁹ wisdom referred to above can better be understood by taking recourse to the three levels of divine unity and unicity mentioned in the Qur’an and as expounded by the mystics. An example of the first level is the verse:

فَاعْلَمْ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لِذَنْبِكَ وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ

وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مُتَقَلَّبَكُمْ وَمَثْوَاكُمْ ﴿٤٧﴾

Know that there is no god except Allah, and plead [to Allah] for forgiveness of your sin and for the faithful, men and women. Allah knows your itinerary and your [final] abode. (47:19)

The emphasis on this first level is the knowledge of God’s unicity on the noetic plane. The doctrinal phrase “there is no god except Allah” makes reference to His comprehensive name of “Allah” and alludes to the metaphysical certainty of the essential unity of all of His names in and through that comprehensive name.

The second level is referred to by such verses as:

وَاللَّهُمَّ إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ

⁸ To quote Plato: “For the authors of those great poems which we admire, do not attain to excellence through the rules of any art; but they utter their beautiful melodies of verse in a state of inspiration, and, as it were, possessed by a spirit not their own.” Plato, *Ion* or: *On the Iliad*.

⁹ *Practical* will be used in its more general sense of “non-theoretical” from here onwards, and when referring to a division of wisdom, it will include both practical wisdom—in its particular sense—and poetical wisdom.

Your god is the One God, there is no god except Him, the All-beneficent, the All-merciful.
(2:163)

شَهِدَ اللَّهُ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ وَأُولُو الْعِلْمِ قَائِمًا بِالْقِسْطِ
لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

Allah bears witness that there is no god except Him—and [so do] the angels and those who possess knowledge—maintainer of justice, there is no god but Him, the Almighty, the All-wise.
(3:18)

ذَٰلِكُمْ اللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ خَلِقُ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ لَّا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَاَنى تَوَفَّكُونَ

That is Allah, your Lord, the creator of all things, there is no god except Him. Then where do you stray? (40:62)

إِنَّمَا إِلَهُكُمُ اللَّهُ الَّذِي لَّا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ وَسِعَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ عِلْمًا

Indeed your God is Allah. There is no god except Him. He embraces all things in knowledge.⁷
(20:98)

The emphasis on this second level is the unity (*wahidiyyah*) of God through His Mercy and Justice on the existential plane. On this more inner and hence more essential level, being is equated with knowledge. In the expression “there is no god except Him,” God’s **name** is not used and the nominative pronoun “He” or its objective case “Him” here is ambiguously extensive so as to comprehend all of His creation. Hence the unity here is the direct link and nexus that all things have with God, the One, through the divine act of creation and manifestation. Man, insofar as he is a creation of God, is also included in this second type of unity that unites the subject and the object in an act of knowing cum being/becoming that surpasses a purely cognitive modality and leads to what can rightfully be called a holistic *wisdom*. William Chittick expresses this idea in the following words:

"Wisdom" is not just knowledge, not even an exalted knowledge of the truth itself. The word also denotes putting knowledge into practice in the appropriate way. *Hikma* [the Arabic word for “wisdom”] is differentiated from knowledge by the activity that it demands, or the fact that it demands knowing how things truly are and then acting in a way that coincides exactly with how they are. In Islamic texts, it is understood to be closely allied with justice...which is often defined as putting things where they belong and ensuring that everything has its proper place, the supreme virtue in philosophical ethics.¹⁰

¹⁰ William Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afdal al-Dīn Kāshānī* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 70.

The third level of Qur'anic unity is the most esoteric and mystical. The following verses allude to this level of unity:

يُنزِلُ الْمَلَائِكَةَ بِالرُّوحِ مِنْ أَمْرِهِ عَلَى مَنْ يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ
أَنْ أَنْذِرُوا أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنَا فَاتَّقُونِ

He sends down the angels with the Spirit of His command to whomever He wishes of His servants: 'Warn [the people] that there is no god but I; so be wary of Me.' (16:2)

إِنِّي أَنَا اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنَا فَاعْبُدْنِي وَأَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ لِذِكْرِي

Indeed I am Allah—there is no god but I. So worship Me, and maintain the prayer for My remembrance. (20:14)

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ مِنْ رَسُولٍ إِلَّا نُوحِي إِلَيْهِ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنَا فَاعْبُدُونِ

We did not send any apostle before you but We revealed to him that 'There is no god but I; so worship Me.' (21:25)

On this third and most essential level the emphasis is on the absolute unicity of the divine Subject. In the expression “there is no god but I,” the allusion is to the level of beyond-being and the divine Essence where there is no multiplicity whatsoever—not even that of the divine Names—and the divine Subject resides in and is indistinguishable from the divine Object. This is the Supreme Identity and the Supreme Self that defies complete expression by human conceptual and discursive language. The ultimate and supreme “I” is the wholeness and totality of the divine and is the modality of His absoluteness as well as His infinitude. The “I” is the All and is All-possibility, one possibility being—by virtue of His infinitude and His perfection—the manifestation of a being created in His image and invested with a Spirit-intellect from His Spirit. This theomorphic creature, by evidence of his unique intellectual capacity, is none other than man. Being inspired by something of God's Spirit, man reflects the divine “I” in his own self to the degree that he realizes his utter dependence and indigence vis-à-vis God almighty. The most perfect reflection is accomplished by the perfect man. Such a man realizes his potential as God's vicegerent and is able to perfect his self in line with God's origination.

فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا فِطْرَتَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي فَطَرَ النَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ
اللَّهِ ذَلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَيِّمُ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

So set your heart on the religion primordially, the origination of Allah according to which He originated mankind (There is no altering Allah's creation; that is the upright religion, but most people do not know.) (30:30)

The soul of such a man becomes self-less vis-à-vis the lower carnal desires, and becomes a centred and balanced self insofar as it is in accordance with the original nature upon which it was created by God. Having emptied itself of other-than-God, it is only such a soul that can truly reflect the divine ipseity and can say—with some measure of propriety—“I”; as in this case the “I” of the human subject is nothing other than the Supreme “I” of the divine subject/object. Hence, it can be said that the subjective self is nothing but a manifestation or radiation of the objective supreme Self and can only be said to have substance when it subsumes its will to the ultimate Will of God. This then immediately ties and unites the theoretical and practical wisdoms and makes them into a singular totality and ensures their validity as well as their efficacy.

The Qur’an emphasises this intimate connection between the Supreme Identity of God and its immediate consequence on the plane of human volition in the verse previously quoted:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ مِنْ رَسُولٍ إِلَّا نُوحِيَ إِلَيْهِ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنَا فَاعْبُدُونِ

We did not send any apostle before you but We revealed to him that ‘There is no god but I; so worship Me.’ (21:25)

This link is quintessential to all praxis and informs its deepest substance.

When “God” is announced as dead at the scene of the crime that modernity represents, there is no Supreme self-subsisting being for there to be a Supreme Self, and for that Supreme Self to then have consequences and implications for human action. Hence the practical aspect of wisdom, with ethics being its most basic element, is left without any substantive and cognitive content. In the absence of the Principle to tie all parts together into a whole, the parts become separative and disconnected even from one other. This leads to the reduction and compartmentalization of science and knowledge; which in turn further ruptures the totality of knowledge-being for the human subject. T.S. Eliot most eloquently described this malaise of modernity in verse as follows:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
 And the dry stone no sound of water.¹¹

In such circumstances where the higher sciences are no longer given validity and are seen to be a part of the humanities, both metaphysics and ethics are left without substantive content. This means that on the theoretical level these most noble of sciences and wisdoms are left open to a disabling relativism cum destructive nihilism; and on the practical level what is left is nothing but an instrumental physics (i.e. technology) that becomes the handmaiden of an unprincipled politics that devolves into utter anarchy.

¹¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*, Part 1, v. 19-24.