

# UNDERSTANDING REALISM FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF PHILOSOPHY AND ISLAM

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## Abstract

Philosophical Realism is a theory that claims that whatever we see in the world is real, existing on its own and is not an illusion or mental framework. It is opposed to the skeptic and solipsist theory which claims that anything outside one's own mind is not real, rather it is fictitious. Idealism is a theory which claims that the reality is influenced by our thoughts and ideas. There is an Islamic point of view about the reality of essence and existence which is different from the philosophical Realism theories of essence and existence. All the theories come with their own set of limitations. In this article we have tried to address these limitations. We have also introduced to the readers a detailed explanation of Islamic Realism and how it addresses such limitations. In doing so we have introduced a novel methodology of addressing Realism in its correct perspective.

*Keywords – Realism, Universals, Nominalism, Idealism, Islamic Realism*

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## Introduction

There are four primary branches of philosophy, viz., (i) *metaphysics*, (ii) *epistemology*, (iii) *logic*, and (iv) *ethics*. A brief account of these is given below.

(i) *Metaphysics* studies the principles of existence, identity, change, space, time, necessity, possibility, etc. It also studies the nature of consciousness and relationship between mind and matter.

The theory of metaphysical realism states that the objects in the world, their properties and relationship between them exists collectively and is independent of our thoughts or perceptions. This means that the world is independent of how human beings think about it. Our ability to comprehend the objects of this world is limited because humans are mortal creatures living in an

environment which is not of their making. This is the reason the humans have been discovering new realities in this world throughout their known history.

(ii) *Epistemology* is the theory of knowledge; how it is acquired, its methods, validity, and scope to differentiate between a justified belief and an unjustified or unsubstantiated faith or opinion. Like, some people make idols of mud and metals from their hands, give them some names, associate certain powers with them in their minds and worship them as gods. Over a period, their following generations abandon these idols, make new idols and call them with new names and worship them as their gods. This age-old practice is continued in some societies from time immemorial. The others look at these idols and consider them as part of the cultural practices of these societies, rather than gods as claimed by people in these societies.

*Epistemological realism* is a tool for deducing what can be known about an object which is existent independently. This is also called the 'objectivist theory'. It contrasts with 'epistemological idealism,' known as 'subjectivist theory', which claims that what one knows about an object is only in one's mind.

(iii) *Philosophy of logic* is the study of thought process, correct reasoning, and valid interpretation in expressing a logical truth.

*Logical realism* is the study of logic which is independent of mind and language. Some people call it metaphysical logical realism in which they claim, first is a true logic, the second is that true logic is mind and language independent, and the

third is that it is better than any other logic that describes the structure of reality.

(iv) Ethics or moral philosophy is related to classifying, endorsing, and recommending theories of right and wrong behavior of human beings.

Moral or ethical realism is to focus on objective features of the world accurately. Ethical realists believe that there are rightful objective answers in ethics to help human beings in rational behavior and justified decisions making.

### Types of Philosophical Realism

Philosophy is a subject full of disputes and defending and opposing views about a subject matter. The theory of philosophical realism is no exception. Different positions have been taken by philosophers in this context which can be categorized as supporting and opposing it. Philosophical realists are those who defend affirmative answers to the questions related to external world, scientific theories, mathematics, and morality. To a common man, the affirmative answers look like common sense, but the disputes arise when objections are raised to hinder generalized categorization of realism as a philosophical position. A few of these theories are described below.

#### (i) Ontological Realism

Ontology is a branch of metaphysics which studies the concept of existence and reality and how the entities are grouped into various categories, like substances, properties, relations, events, etc. These categories are distinguished based on necessity, possibility, universality, abstractness, concreteness, etc. In this context, the earliest theory of 'Universals' proposed by Greek philosopher Plato (424-348 BC) is important.

#### (ii) Theory of Universals

The objects we see in the world are individual, specific, and concrete. These objects are both, general, and abstract. For instance, consider redness of a flower. There are many things in the world which are red. This means that the redness

is a general property. This general property is known as 'universals.' The question is, how 'general properties' (universals), exist in relation to abstract or individual objects. Plato said the universals exist in a separate reality, distinct from the things of our experience. This is known as Plato's theory of forms. It claims that the physical world is not the factual world; rather ultimate reality exists outside our physical world. He described this reality as forms which are also abstract and perfect ideals above time and space and exist in the Realm of Forms. Like, the beauty and justice exist over the 'beautiful objects' and 'just acts.' Similar is the case with redness which exists over the red objects. Since these forms belong to the realm of forms, they are beyond the reach of sense perception. Meaning, it is just a belief about the appearances of the objects, as opposed to the knowledge of what is truly real. The forms are knowable only by wise philosophically schooled intellect.

Plato's theory of universals is a subject of scholarly debate. Plato's student Aristotle (384-322 BC) took a moderate stand and advocated a moderate realism stating that while there are universals, they can have no independent standing and existence, as they exist only in the objects that represent them. It means that beauty exists within the beautiful things, justice exists within 'just acts,' and redness exists within the 'red objects.'

#### (iii) Realism and Nominalism

The issue of the existence of 'universals' was debated extensively during the Middle Ages. There are two theories in this context, (i) universals are real, existing outside the objects, and (ii) universals are properties of things that are real.

A property is known to be an inherent quality or attribute or label to describe a thing. Like all human beings have a specific shape, a face, two hands and two legs. These are the physical properties of human beings.

The dispute is about the properties that are not physical, observable or measurable but are derivable, like beauty and justice, which are

associated with certain objects of beauty and acts of justice.

Philosophical realism is a theory that universals are real and exist independently. Philosophical nominalism is a theory that universals do not exist as independent physical or tangible material. This debate was important to theological scholars during Middle Ages in matters like God's love, God's mercy, salvation, etc. To them, these were the matters of eternal truth. Like God's love or mercy is associated with virtuous deeds but is independent of virtuous actions. Similarly, the life lived as per the commandments of God is linked to salvation in Hereafter.

#### (iv) Realism and Idealism

Theories of Philosophical realism and philosophical idealism are related to human perception. Philosophical realism is a theory that states that whatever we see in the world is real, existing on its own and is not an illusion or mental framework. Philosophical idealism is a theory which states that our reality is shaped by our thoughts and ideas. Philosophical realism is the actual practical view of a situation, 'what actually is', while philosophical idealism is 'what it could be.'

This can be explained by a famous example. Looking at a glass with some water in it, an idealist would say, the glass is half full. But a realist would say, the glass is half empty. Meaning, idealists tend to be positive thinkers. The realists are not negative thinkers, rather they view the things with less hopeful eyes. They are rational, careful thinkers and weigh their options before making a choice. Realists make more safer choices in life as compared to the idealists who often take risky decisions.

#### (v) Moral Realism

Moral realism is a theory that describes what actions and traits are morally permissible. Moral realists claim that moral principles are objectively as true as any historical or geographic statements which are true or false as per the historical or geographical facts. This theory is challenged by sceptics or antirealists saying that there is no

realm of moral facts like logic and mathematics and human beings do not have a specific faculty with which they can detect the truths of morality. The antirealists say that moral actions are natural actions which promote happiness. Some philosophers like Australian philosopher J. L. Mackie (1917 - 1981) denied the theory of moral discourse as error theory.

#### (vi) Scientific Realism vs Instrumentalism

Scientific realism is about the correct prediction of the observable facts about an object which can be measured and recorded by scientific experiments and observations. Science aims at true account of what the physical world is like. These accounts are treated as descriptions of the aspects of reality.

The theory of instrumentalism claims that scientific theories are instruments and sets of reasoning rules for generating prediction about physical and observable natural phenomenon. These theories are devised in such a way that the question of their truth or falsehood does not arise or is of no concern to science.

#### (vii) Realism of Essence and Existence

Avicenna (Ibn Sina) (980 - 1037) was the first Arab philosopher and commentator on Aristotle who brought the issue of reality of essence and existence into focus saying that existence is an accident (attribute) of essence which comes to essence as an element of necessity and an efficient cause. In this he followed the philosophy of Aristotle (384 – 322 BC) and his Greek follower, Alexander of Aphrodisias, (born 200 CE).

Another Arab scholar, Averroes (Ibn Rushd) (1126 - 1198) disagreed with Avicenna's view that existence is an attribute of essence. He claimed that it is, in fact its opposite; something exists, and the essence is its accident (attribute). Averroes was also a follower of Aristotle but claimed that Avicenna was following Neoplatonism, developed during 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century which was opposed to the teachings of Aristotelianism. He strongly differed with

Avicenna and Alfarabi (Al-Farabi) (870 - 950) in many philosophical issues.

Averroes was criticized by famous Islamic scholar Algazelus (Al-Ghazali) (1058 - 1111) for his rhetoric that the Quranic verses should be interpreted allegorically if they look to contradict the philosophical theories of Aristotelianism. Al-Ghazali was the most prominent Islamic theologian, philosopher, jurist, and logician in Islamic history. His book titled 'Incoherence of the Philosophers' is a landmark treatise in the history of philosophy.

Many philosophers are of the opinion that Aristotle's methodology in arriving at conclusions is not coherent, full of logical disjunctions and irresolvable internal contradictions as he uses different methods for different topics. Like he used analogical method in his philosophy of 'being' or 'existence', and in his Posterior Analytics (Analytica Posteriora), that deals with demonstration, definition, scientific knowledge and logic, he has discussed the issue of 'essence'.

## Islamic Realism

Islamic realism is different from the philosophical realism theories of essence and existence propagated by Plato, Aristotle, and their followers like Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Avicenna, Averroes and others.

In Islamic theology, there are three meanings of 'existence', viz., (i) *essence or essence of existence*, (ii) *cosmic perception (perception in relation to this Cosmos)*, and (iii) *manifestation*. We have briefly explained these in the following.

### (i) *Essence or Essence of Existence*

When we see a thing, we say, it is there. Like we say, Jack is there, horse is there, cow is there, etc. In all these, 'is there' is common. Meaning, 'essence' or 'essence of existence' is an external thing, seeing which we understand the meaning of 'is there'.

### (ii) *Cosmic Perception (perception in relation to the Cosmos)*

As we have described above, the meaning of 'is there' is understood by witnessing the 'essence of existence'. The essence of existence lies externally, and its picture comes into our mind and our mind analysis it and separates the thing from its 'existence' and understands that Jack is there. Jack is the essence of existence and when we say Jack is there, this is known as cosmic perception. With this we understand that whole Cosmos is a 'perceived and understanding meaning' which is in our mind.

Why we say 'essence' or 'existence' looking at a thing? It is for the understanding of certain issues. When we say, 'Jack is there' in the meaning of 'existence', we do not consider the attributes of Jack. When we say, 'Jack is there' in the meaning of 'essence', we take the attributes of Jack, like he is tall, white complexioned, courageous etc. Outside is Jack's person, but his attributes are in our mind which we are drawing by looking at him.

### (iii) *Manifestation*

The meaning of 'entity' is an 'affirmed being' or 'confirmed existence'. There are two statuses of our perceptions. The status where the 'being or existence' is understood is known as Cosmic perception. And when a person has come to our physical world (was born) or has come to our home, he will be known as entity, meaning his existence is a confirmed, he is there in a particular place.

The essence or essence of existence is external and is the reality, fact, or quiddity of cosmic perception in our mind. In other words, the essence of being or existence is external and is the origin, intention, reality, fact of the 'cosmic perception', an aspect which is derived, understood, known and is not available externally, but its essence of being is available outside.

The above understanding helps us to know the existence of Allah. When we look at things in the cosmos, we realize that there are various hierarchies of existence, like, individual, collective, or grouped. Together they make the Cosmos. When we talk of galaxies, there are

various kinds. Similarly, Jack is an individual, also part of human race, an inhabitant of earth and part of our solar system.

Existence can be divided into two categories, (i) independent existence, and (ii) dependent existence. The existence of creatures on planet earth is dependent on their food, environment, habitat, etc. Similar is the case with galaxies, they are dependent upon each other as they need to follow a particular path in mutual coherence. Similarly, the planets and the life in them depends upon the heat of their stars for survival. The dependence of existence in this cosmos is evidence that there is an independent existence that supports all these existences and helps them in their mutual survival. This independent existent is real, living, and omnipotent. And this is Allah.

*It is in Quran* – ‘Say (O’ Prophet ﷺ), Allah is one (and one all the way. His Being does not contain elements. He is not a compound). Allah is independent (existing on His own. Everybody is dependent upon Him). He does not have children (He has not given birth to anyone). Nobody has given birth to Him. (Allah is there from the beginning and no one precedes Him). No one can match Him or can equal Him.’ (*Al-Quran: 112*).

There can be a question in this context. Is our existence or existence of human beings not real? Surely, our existence is real, but our existence is dependent upon the existence of Allah who is our creator and who is supporting our existence on this planet.

## Conclusion

We have described various theories about realism in different areas of philosophical concern. We have also described the viewpoints of philosophers in defending and opposing these theories. When we read about these theories, it looks like these philosophers have spent a lot of time in defending or opposing these theories with their arguments. This had indeed helped in developing the knowledge base about various issues. In our evaluation of these debates, we conclude that it is important to look at the things in the Cosmos with a positive mind set. The

Quran says, Allah did not create the heavens and the earth and everything between them as a game’. (44:38).

When we compare different viewpoints about essence and existence, the Islamic viewpoint is meritorious and factual. If we study Quran with a positive frame of mind, many issue will become crystal clear.

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## About the author



Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri is well known all over the world for his explanation of Islamic Tawheed, Sahih Iman, Sahih Islam and Sahih Ihsan. He is a scholar, historian, and poet. He is the author of Tafseer-e-Asedi, Irshad Al Asedi, Fusus Al-Iman and over 1000 books on various Islamic subjects. He has written many research articles on religion, history, and other subjects. He is also the Editor in Chief of CIFIA Global Journal.