

The Principality of Society: An Analysis of Works of Ayatullah Mutahhari

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Abstract

The question around the existence and essence of society and its relationship with individuals has been one of the main topics of inquiry in the literature of social philosophy and sociological studies. Among the Muslim philosophers one can trace the seeds of this discussion in the writing of Farabi and Toosi. From amongst contemporary Muslim scholars one can point to Allameh Tabatabai, Ayatullah Mutahhari, Ayatullah Muhammad Baqir Sadr, and Ayatullah Misbah Yazdi as the main figures who have addressed this issue in some details. This work presents the views of late Ayatullah Murtada Mutahhari on the nature of society and its relationship to individuals from a philosophical perspective.

Keywords: Society, Individual, Secondary Philosophical Intelligible, Real Compound, Principality of Society

I. Introduction

The question surrounding the existence of society and its relationship with individuals has been one of the main topics of inquiry in the literature of social philosophy and sociological studies. This topic is often referred to as the question of fundamentality or principality of society.¹ Sociologists are not well positioned to address this issue because any branch of science assumes its object of study as given and therefore existing. As a result, a sociologist must assume the existence of society before embarking on studying its nature, characteristics, and the laws governing it.

Therefore, the discussion around the existence and principality of society is one of philosophical nature. This study presents the philosophical views of Ayatullah Murtada Mutahhari (1919-1979) on this issue. However, before doing so it would be necessary to have a short discussion about the phrase of principality of society and what it refers to.

In general, the literature on principality of society has interpreted this concept from at least three different angles:

- a. Legal interpretation: In this view the principality of society is interpreted as giving the wellbeing of society a preference over the wellbeing of individuals. In other words, the principality of society would argue that when the wellbeing of an individual or a minority group is in contradiction with the welfare of the society or the majority of the people, then the latter should take precedence and preference over the former.
- b. Psychological interpretation: Here the principality of society is interpreted as strong and all-encompassing influence of society over individuals in a way that all aspects of one's life and thoughts are influenced and shaped by society.
- c. Philosophical interpretation: The principality of society from a philosophical perspective refers to society having a real existence independent of individuals.

If existence of society depends on individuals or in other words if society cannot exist without conglomeration of individuals, then several outcomes are possible:

- a. After grouping together and forming a society, the independent identity of individuals are not altered and individuals remain as independent as they were before coming together to form a society. This resembles ingredients in a salad.
- b. When individuals convene to form a society, their identities are then influenced by each other to some degree and an overall "social identity" is formed. In this case, each individual while identified as a unique person is also associated with that "social identity". This resembles ingredients in a stew where each individual is similar to different ingredients of a stew and the stew alters the shape, taste, and texture of each ingredient to a degree.

¹For example, see Javadi Amoli (2008, 307-345), Parsaniya (2011, 186), Misbah Yazdi (1999a, 47), Misbah Yazdi (1999b), Sadr (2002, 109-110), and Tabataba'ee (2001, 97-100).

c. When individuals come together to form a society, they lose all of their independence and individual identities. In this case, individual are no longer identifiable through their unique individual identities and characteristics. In this case the “social identity” is the only element everyone in a given society is identified with. This resembles a chemical reaction. For example, when hydrogen and oxygen are interacted under certain conditions and quantities, a new entity known as water comes to existence. The hydrogen and oxygen in water have lost their individual properties and functionalities. While hydrogen by itself is extremely flammable and fire needs oxygen to continue burning, water is void of these properties.

This essay will present Ayatullah Mutahhari’s views on the question of principality of society. Beyond its philosophical attractiveness, this issue can have significant impact in policy circles, making this philosophically flavored essay also relevant to policymakers. For example, if one is of the opinion that “social identity” annihilates “individual identity” then does that mean that in legal front, he/she will also be of the opinion that the welfare of majority or society at large has to take precedence to the welfare of individuals? If not will that be a logical inconsistency on his/her part? And if yes, then what are the implication of this philosophical view on social issue when it comes to topics such as poverty and inequality.

II. Ayatullah Mutahhari and Principality of Society

There is no question that society is composed of individuals. In other words, it is through the conglomeration of individuals that society forms. The main question here is then how and in what ways and forms society and individuals are related? To answer this question, Ayatullah Mutahhari highlights four distinct views:

1. Society is a hypostatized fusion of individuals which does not exist in reality in the external world. In this view society does not have an essential or independent existence and one can resemble it to a bag of sands (each sand being an individual). In this view of society, each individual continues to possess his or her independence and unique identity and what exists in reality and in the outside world is each individual and not society. This view “is maintaining the priority or principality of individuals [in an absolute sense] because, according to it, neither society has a real existence, nor laws and customs in a given society” (Mutahhari 1997, 13).

2. Society is an artificial compound. Imagine a car with thousands and sometimes millions of parts put together in a specific order and combination. By themselves, individual parts in a car are never able to perform the tasks that are carried out by a car. Also, by simply being put next to each other in a random manner, these components cannot do what a car does. There has to be some sort of specific coordination and interrelationship between all the parts in a car that would make them as a whole accomplish what a car is set to do. In this scenario, a car does not have an independent existence outside of the parts making it. Here, the artificial compound (the car) is not only a combination of all the physical parts, but in addition, a specific relationship between the parts makes them perform and behave in a way that is expected of a car. Without this specific order and combination, the simple fact of coming together of parts will not result into a car.

In similar ways, society is more than a simple conglomeration of individuals. Cultures, religions, political orders, or any other institutional arrangements define the ways in which individuals are related to one another and behave. It is this relationship between independently identifiable groups of individuals that creates society. While the combination of and institutions give rise to society, neither the identity of individuals nor that of the institutions are dissolved completely in the identity of the society as a whole.

This view also maintains the priority and essentiality of individual over society but at the same time “individuals being the constitutes of a society, share a common destiny and indetity” (Mutahhari 1997, 13) and are linked to one another in a special way that governs their common behavior and goals in life “while also the society has an identity independent of its individual parts” (Mutahhari 1997, 14).

3. Society is a real compound at a level similar to that of a natural compound. The mixture and fusion is of minds and spirits and not of physical bodies. So, while each individual is uniquely identifiable through his/her physical bodies, individuals when merged into society create a new non-physical identity which can be termed as “social spirit”. In AyatullahMutahhari’s own words:

“This view recognizes the independent existence of individuals; because, according to it, the existence of components of society (individuals) is not merged into the existence of society. It also does not accept any unified existence for society like that of a chemical compound. At the same time, it recognizes the objective reality of society, because it considers the synthesis of individuals similar to a chemical synthesis with regard to their spiritual and intellectual makeup. As a result of this synthesis, individuals acquire a new identity, which is the dominant character of society. On that basis of this view, due to the process of interaction between the parts, an entirely new entity has emerged: A new spirit, a new consciousness, and a new will, which is over and above intelligence, consciousness and will of the individuals, and which dominates the intelligence and consciousness of all its individual members” (Mutahhari 1997, 14).

Thus, in this view, the importance, priority, or principality of individual as well as society is argued for. While it recognizes the independent existence and will of individuals, it also adheres to the idea of the “social spirit” that is a result of conglomeration of individuals which in return will influences the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings of individuals.

4. Society is a real compound at level more than that of a natural compound. In this view, without society, individuals lack identity and are like animals. In other words, individuals get their identity from the society. The humane dimensions of human beings such as emotions, thoughts, values, feelings, and etcetera are all rooted in and influenced by the “social spirit” that governs the society. As a result, although in this view individuals have to physically conglomerate to create a society, given that society always existed and will always exist next to individuals, the rules governing the behaviors, emotions, and thoughts of individuals are given to them by the “social spirit” and therefore no unique or independent identity can be attached to individuals. Hence,the identity of each individual is identical to that of the “social identity”. “According to this view if man had not acquired social existence and sociology, he would not

have reached the stage of acquiring human psyche and human psychology” (Mutahhari 1997, 13) and would have remained as an animal. This view argues for the essentiality, principality, or the priority of society.

From the above views, Ayatullah Mutahhari argues that the third view (i.e. society as a real compound at a level similar to that of a natural compound) as accurate and descriptive of the relationship between individuals and societies. He also, argues that this view is in accordance to the teachings of the Qur'an when he Writes:

“The Qur'an puts forward the idea of a common history, a common destiny, a common record of deeds, a common consciousness, understanding, sensibility, and a common conduct for the societies (or *Ummah*). It is obvious that if the entity referred to as '*Ummah*' did not have an objective existence, it would be meaningless to talk of fate, understanding, conscience, obedience, and disobedience with reference to it” (Mutahhari 1997, 14).

Ayatullah Mutahhari then refers to the following list of Qur'anic verses as evidence that Qur'an views society as a natural compound which has existence and is real:

- Thus we have made pleasing to every *Ummah* or nation their deeds. (6:108)
- And for every *Ummah* or nation is a [specified] term. So when their time has come, they will not remain behind an hour, nor will they precede [it]. (7:34)
- and every *Ummah* or nation intended [a plot] for their messenger to seize him, and they disputed by [using] falsehood to [attempt to] invalidate thereby the truth. So I seized them, and how [terrible] was My penalty. (40:5)
- And you will see every *Ummah* or nation kneeling [from fear]. Every *Ummah* or nation will be called to its record [and told], "Today you will be recompensed for what you used to do. (45:28)

In all of the above verses, Allah associates feelings, death, life, and consequences to an *Ummah*, a society or a nation. Moreover, in the case of the story of the she-camel of *Thamud*, one reads in the Qur'an that Allah punished the whole *Ummah* or society of *Thamud* for the sinful act of one person who disobeyed Allah's clear orders, because the whole society of *Thamud* went along and approved that individual's actions. Thus, Ayatullah Mutahhari, argues that the third view of society outlined above is in line with the Qur'anic teachings.

Moreover, he writes:

“This synthesis itself is unique and special, with no parallel in the universe. Since the components do affect and influence one another and are transformed by mutual effect to acquire a new personality, this synthesis is a natural and real synthesis. However, in this case, the 'whole' or the 'compound' does not exist as a single physical entity ... In the synthesis of society and individual, though an actual synthesis takes place – because the constituents, the individuals, as a result of their interaction, attain a new form and identity – the plurality of individuals are not converted into a unity. This synthesis does not produce anything like a 'unified man', a physical entity in which all individuals have

physically merged. Society conceived as a single physical entity is only a hypostatized abstraction” (Mutahhari 1997, 13).

The question arises then: what does AytullahMutahhari mean by the phrase “new form”? One can consider this “new form” and the society as a “secondary philosophical intelligible”² and AyatullahMutahhari also considers the second view of society described above as such. In this interpretation, the synthesis (of individuals) does not point to a real outside entity that is tangible. Rather, it is a synthesis that has roots in the real world as it is characterized by realities in the outside world.

What is then the difference between second and third view of society highlighted above if we consider society as a “secondary philosophical intelligible”? According to the second view above society is a “secondary philosophical intelligible” because (a) it is considered as a real synthesis, (b) it does not have an identifiable and tangible external entity associated with it, and (c) it is characterized by realities in the outside world. Therefore, it is not a secondary logical intelligible. Based on this view, “the parts of this synthesis (or the individuals) interact in a specific manner and the result of this interaction is different from the summation of the individuals acting independently and in absence of coordination with one another” (Mutahhari 1997, 18).

However, the third view which AyatullahMutahhari advocates, has one main element that is missing in the second view and that is the new existence of “social identity or spirit” as a result of individuals’ interactions. AyatullahMutahhari considers society as a “living entity” that one can associate will, spirit, life and death with. This is because one can identify laws and characteristics that are applicable to a society but not to individuals partaking in that society. As a result, in addition to individuals in a given society, another “being” must exist that these specific (social) laws and characteristics can be associated with and referred to.

The main point that needs to be heeded in this discussion is that when we talk about society, are we referring to it as a whole entity or are we referring to it as the relationship between the parts of that entity (i.e. individuals)? For example, from a philosophical viewpoint, we could think of a “house” from two different perspectives. First, we think of it as a whole entity which can be pointed to in the outside world as a real being that has walls, ceiling, doors, and etcetera. Second, we can think of a house as a relationship between different parts and components that make a house such as doors, ceiling, windows, walls, and etcetera. When we say “a house protects us against wild animals and from heat/cold”, this is a reality that does take place in the outside world and the house does really protect its inhabitants from wild animals and from heat/cold. Note that this functionality of the house is not resulted from anything more than and in addition to the components of the house. Nor is it the case that each component that makes the house has such a functionality by itself. Walls without ceiling, windows without walls, and doors without

²Universal concepts which are employed in the intellectual sciences are divided into three groups: (1) whatish concepts or first intelligible such as the concept of man and the concept of whiteness; (2) philosophical concepts or secondary philosophical intelligibles, such as the concept of cause and the concept of effect; and (3) logical concepts or secondary logical intelligibles, such as conversion (‘aksmustawī) and contraposition (‘aknaqīd). (Misbah Yazdi 1999a, 119)

walls, have no such functionality and will fail to protect people against wild animals and from heat/cold. This functionality of a house is only a result of a specific arrangement of the different components that make up a house and without that specific arrangement and positioning of different components of a house, the individual components will not have the functionality of protecting against wild animals and heat/cold.

The same can be conceived about a society. One can consider the interaction and relationship between individuals yielding to a new outside reality, called society, which is characterized by new functionalities and characteristics which are beyond and in addition to those of individuals. However, one must be careful to note that there is a difference between the relationships of components of that make a house with that of the relationship of individuals in a society.³

Therefore, society is a “secondary philosophical intelligible” and while it cannot be pointed to in the outside world like one points to an object, its characterization is external and rooted in the realities of the outside world. In other words, society is not the creation of the imaginal faculty and the subject has no role in creating it, rather it is a result of an outside reality that is based on the interactions and relationships between individuals.

Therefore the main difference between the second and the third view of the society is the following: while in both views the individuals components of a machine and a society don't lose their independence and characteristics, in the third view of society the behavior, thoughts, and actions of individuals are influenced as a result of the interactions between individuals. However, in the second view, the workings and functionality of components making up a machine will remain the same no matter if they are operating by themselves or in conjunction with one another. In short, the characteristic of a society depends on characteristics of individuals plus the outcomes resulted from the interactions between them.⁴

III. Conclusion

The question around the essence of society has attracted many great minds throughout the human scholarly history and Muslim thinkers from the medieval era to present time have tackled this issues from various angles. Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari is one the most recent prominent Muslim philosophers who has provided unique insights into the essence of society. This study provided a detailed analysis on Ayatullah Mutahhari's view about the essence of society and showed that he considers society a reality in form of “secondary philosophical intelligible”. In his view, it is the relationship between individuals that yields to the external reality of society which is a new entity that is not separate from individuals nor annihilates individuals. It is through such an understanding of society, Ayatullah Mutahhari argues, that rules and regulations are sensible, relevant, and justifiable.

³ See Tabataba'ee (2003, 172-173).

⁴ See Misbah Yazdi (1999a), for a critique of Ayatullah Misbah Yazdi on Ayatullah Mutahhari's view on society.⁴

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