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## CHAPTER 49

# Epistemology

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### GENERAL QUESTIONS

Perhaps two major questions relating to knowledge characterize intellectual efforts to address this subject in the Islamic period. The first question is: In what sense does human knowledge detract from, or resemble, God's knowledge? The second question is: What is the role of the person who has knowledge?

It is possible with these two questions as terms of reference to understand much of the intellectual debate – implicit or explicit – that went on in the Islamic milieu on the subject of knowledge. The first question is especially pertinent given two widely held beliefs: (1) that one of God's major attributes and abilities – besides life and power – is knowledge, and (2) that true knowledge is attainable only if and when one has knowledge of the divine cause or secret of the universe (because how otherwise, in the context of the widely held belief in God as the first and final cause of the universe, can one be said to have knowledge about the minutest item in the ontological order?). In a nutshell, these two beliefs are that one of God's distinctive traits is His knowledge, and that true knowledge is of God. Given these beliefs, to say that human beings can attain true knowledge is to say (1) that they can acquire an ability that God possesses, and (2) that God can be to a human being *qua* knowledge almost what a human being is *qua* God (notwithstanding ontological differences). To understand these implications is to understand the underlying tensions and apprehensions which characterized the debates that took place among intellectuals about this subject. On the one hand we find views claiming that knowledge of God or the first cause – whether philosophically or mystically – is possible, and so is “union” with God in one form or another; and on the other hand we find views that a human being, because of his or her inbuilt intellectual and existential limitations, is bound at

the outer reaches of the mind to make the leap from personal capabilities (whether rational or mystical) to faith in the pursuit of understanding the universe. On this second view "revealed knowledge" (the Qur'anic text) assumes a literal importance – with varieties of this view at one end upholding a totally literal understanding of the Qur'an; while on the first view the revealed text assumes a symbolic importance – with varieties of this view at one end upholding a totally metaphorical understanding of the Qur'an. Yet more poignantly, on the first view revelation (hence prophecy) can be argued to be unnecessary for the attainment of true knowledge, while on the second view knowledge which is humanly possible is attainable only through revelation and prophecy.

The second question, relating to function or role, was addressed in literature which one could retrospectively read as "political", in the sense that, once it was established what kind of person possessed knowledge (e.g., a philosopher, a mystic, a preacher, a Qur'anic exegetist, etc.), the next step was to establish what function such a person ought to have in society. Views varied from those espousing Platonic "leadership" roles, to those favouring the retired and reclusive roles. Intellectuals finding themselves in disagreement over who is to be defined as possessing real knowledge may here be in agreement on espousing an active political role for such a person, or a reclusive, advisory role. Inevitably, tensions would arise if both agree that wise men should be rulers but disagree on who is to be defined as wise. Ultimately, if it can be said that there was any tension between a secularist and a religious school of thought with respect to the state in Islam, it was only in relation to this conflict over power between the jurist and the philosopher. It is in this context that one can appreciate the treatise *Faṣl al-maqāl* by Ibn Rushd (Averroes), for whom a resolution of the apparent conflict between revelation and reason (or the attempt to rehabilitate reason through the revealed text) was perhaps more importantly an effort to rehabilitate the political stature of the philosopher in the context of a religious state.

In any case, any debate concerning knowledge in that period could be described as one concerning the abilities and limits of the human mind, and therefore concerning the essence and *raison d'être* of the human being. To what extent is the human mind free to "seek newer and newer worlds", until the limitless has been accomplished? Or to what extent is the human mind limited, not free to question and ordained only to serve? Seen from one perspective, the call is to seek to be as close to perfection and to God as possible. Seen from the opposite perspective, this unholy quest simply reinforces the "original" sin: the sin, as al-Shahrastānī describes it in the introduction to his *Milal wa'l-nihāl* which Satan committed by asking "Why?" All later dissensions and disagreements, al-Shahrastānī claims, originate from this intellectual act of rebelliousness (of transcending the written text in search of an individual opinion).



Within these two extreme poles one may comfortably find most of the views expressed by intellectuals living in the Islamic period concerning the subject of knowledge. In what follows, a brief outline of the four main intellectual schools will be presented, followed by a closer look at some of the operating concepts in two of them.

### ❧ METHODS OF KNOWLEDGE: SCHOOLS ❧

What were the major "epistemological" trends in the Islamic period, and how can one give a general characterization of them? Our initial characterization might seem too general, but it is important to keep it in mind as a general framework of reference before one addresses the more specialized distinctions. Briefly, it is possible to characterize four general trends or attitudes with respect to knowledge.

Firstly, one can talk about a conservative approach, according to which every humanly attainable truth can be found in the revealed text or can be logically extrapolated from truths that are found in that text. According to this view, not every truth is humanly attainable, and it is the mark of a believer to accept that one can only have faith in the more elevated truths. The Qur'ān is specific and reiterant about the contrast between those that have faith (*īmān*) in the divine truths and those who claim to have contrary knowledge (*'ilm*) but are wrong. It is basically God who knows, and who teaches. The first lesson begins with Adam, who is taught "the names of things" before the crowd of angels who are totally without that knowledge (2: 30ff.). However, the lessons continue through the generations and history (e.g., 2: 151), and through the various prophets (e.g., 2: 251). Indeed, the Qur'ān is replete with references to the fact that it is itself the repository of truth, and that it is God who transmits knowledge (*'ilm*) and wisdom (*ḥikmah*). The Qur'ān is also replete with references to the fact that nature is full of "clues" (*āyāt*) indicating God's wisdom and wholistic plan which it is the task of human reason to unravel. Above all to be a Muslim believer – to submit – is to accept that the human intellect is limited, and therefore to resort to faith. In this frame of reference, the domain of epistemic intellectual exercise is limited to the Qur'ānic text, either by way of direct and comprehensive acquaintance with it or by way of developing the necessary skill to extrapolate from it. This latter skill (analogy, or *qiyās*) is developed by the jurists, who are called upon to make judgments over specific events which are covered in the Qur'ān only in a general sense. Analogy becomes the skill to apply the principle to the newly arising situation.

In his characterization of Islamic intellectual schools of thought Ibn Khaldūn describes this trend as the "knowledge-through-transmission" (*'ulūm naqliyyah*) category, and he subsumes under it all those skills which

are associated directly with a working knowledge of the Qur'ān, as the exegetes, the jurists, the grammarians and the linguists share. One should assume that the practitioners of these sciences, and the general milieu to which they belonged, constituted the mainstream of thought in the Islamic period. Politically, it is they who dominated the scene. Their derogation of any other kind of scientist, in particular those who relied on "foreign" texts in their pursuit of truth, is none more salient than in Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī's famous dramatic presentation of the "argument" which takes place between a logician and a grammarian in the company of a political ruler, in which the logician is seen to be reduced to a stuttering idiot before the astute grammarian. One assumes that this dramatic exchange typified the general intellectual atmosphere which prevailed at the time rather than literally or scrupulously adhering to the actual minutes of the exchange.

Secondly, a more vivacious approach to, and use of, the human intellect was adopted by the practitioners of *kalām*, or theology. Ibn Khaldūn places this epistemic pursuit along with the previously mentioned sciences (as a knowledge-through-transmission item). Indeed, in so far as the Qur'ānic text defines the frame of reference for the theologian in the exercise of his intellect, *kalām* shares with the transmitted sciences a major characteristic. *Kalām* is conceived as a defensive theology, or a polemical art whose explicitly defined objective is the defence of the Islamic doctrine against would-be detractors – whether agnostics or theologians of other religions. However, while bound to the revealed text as a fixed frame of reference for developing answers and positions, *kalām*'s vivacity is derived from having to address questions and doctrines which originate from a variety of frames of reference. Thus, if the jurist (who is a practitioner of the first set of sciences, and who shares with the theologian the faith that the revealed text constitutes the frame of reference to all answers) exercises his or her powers of reasoning by addressing new questions which arise from the need to maintain the direct relevance of the Qur'ān to unfolding daily events, the theologian goes a step beyond this to address questions which originate from entirely different theological and philosophical frames of reference. This makes the operating theatre of the theologian much wider.

The dialectical skills developed by theologians in their pursuit to address a wide spectrum of ideological challenges involved not only a unique set of logical relations (e.g., distinctive interpretations of causal relations) but also a unique universe of discourse (i.e., a special vocabulary or terminology containing references to items or objects not generally found in other disciplines, such as *ma'nā*, *ḥāl*, *mawḍū'ī*, etc.). These polemical skills, abstracted from any specific subject matter to which they may be applied, come close to being a unique logic or method of reasoning. Indeed, if one abstracts from the specific doctrines or positions adopted

by the two main schools of *kalām* (the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites), one finds that what is common to both is precisely this unique logic (causal relations and objects of discourse), thus rendering al-Shahrastānī's reference to *kalām* as being synonymous with "logic" quite understandable, notwithstanding the derogatory attitude to *kalām* expressed by the so-called "Second Master" of Greek logic in Islam, al-Fārābī.

The classical characterization of *kalām*'s distinctive methodology is its dialectical approach (as opposed to what is regarded generally as the "deductive" approach of the "Classical" logicians in Islam). However, it would be misleading to rely too heavily on this distinguishing feature, as it is not always precisely clear what is meant by it. There is certainly no presumption by its practitioners that the ultimate answers are unknown, and the argumentative nature of its literature is explanatory, not exploratory. Counter-arguments for *kalām* doctrines are formulated, and are then addressed and undermined. It is true that the modern-day reader faces the task of having to reconstruct the general position of the *kalām* practitioners on various subjects (as epistemology, perception, free will, etc.) on an argument-by-argument basis, but this seems to be more of an expository or stylistic problem rather than a substantive logical problem. If one had to focus on a truly distinguishing methodological mark, it is far safer to consider the above-mentioned universe of discourse (both ontological items as well as relations), and to determine in what precise way this differs from the "Classical" logical approach of the Aristotelian school. However, a second and related distinguishing mark of the *kalām* discipline is its ontology: that the world is made up ultimately of primary, indivisible and indistinguishable atoms, which are held together through an external cause. This is a fascinating theory on more than one level, but one suspects that it also provided the ontological foundation for those claiming that even the essence of an object is accidental to it, and is therefore held to it by an external cause (meaning, ultimately, by God of course). Thus one cannot help feeling as one reads al-Ghazzālī's (d. 505/1111) discourse on how God can intervene in the universe in such a way as to make fire, as fire, incapable of burning a combustible object (or how God can therefore intervene not only in determining *whether* things are but also, given that they are, in what they are – the explanation of miracles) that he must have been influenced by his *kalām* teacher al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085). Certainly the atomist theory, unlike the Classical Aristotelian theory on the infinity of matter, is far more amenable to the belief in divine omnipotence, as it provides for far more room for God's intervention in the universe, including enough for the operation of miracles. One suspects also that perhaps it is this theory which is at the backbone of some of the Classical philosophers' theories on identity or unity (being a one, or a this), such as the theories of al-Kindī as expressed in his *Epistle on First Philosophy*, or Avicenna. Both



these philosophers also express views that seem to indicate a bifurcation between essence and existence, or its being accidental to a thing that it is *a* thing, an individual, and therefore being *what* it is. (Discourse on unity/identity/essence in this context seems analogous to the discourse on knowledge, because the same apprehensions relating to the discussion about whether knowledge is the same in both God and humans obtain in relation to the discussion about whether a thing is necessarily what it is.)

Thirdly, there is what generally goes under the name of "philosophy", or *falsafah*, and is assumed as a discipline to be detached from the Islamic milieu, and more influenced by the "foreign" sciences of the Greeks, etc. It is mostly the practitioners of this discipline that are the object of derogation and criticism by the mainstream intellectual schools of thought. What bound them together was perhaps less a set of doctrines than their respect for, and readiness to learn from, the Greek philosophers. To distinguish them from the other disciplines (in particular from the disciplines which depended heavily on the so-called "knowledge-by-transmission" method), Ibn Khaldūn called them adherents of the "knowledge-by-intellect" method. In other words, they were supposed in theory to be adherents – even worshippers of reason, and unbound by any framework of reference. But in practice they were in general bound by their own framework of reference, namely, the received set of philosophical and scientific works transmitted to them from the Greek and Syriac. Indeed, it is arguable that they were as bound to their specific framework of reference, and as bound to its parameters for the exercise of their reason, as were the practitioners of *kalām* bound to the revealed text. Put differently, they worked from a transmitted body of knowledge analogously to the way the theologians worked. But because this body of knowledge was foreign, and generally seemed to be being presented as a substitute for, if not a superior replacement of, the traditional Islamic body of knowledge, the philosophers were a constant target of criticism and suspicion. The claim of *falsafah* to be the repository of real truth drew scathing attacks by leading Muslim thinkers, such as al-Ghazzālī and Ibn Taymiyyah. Indeed, *falsafah* never flourished except among its own practitioners, and it was generally marginal to mainstream Islamic society.

However, it is difficult to claim (as their opponents assumed) that all philosophers defended the same set of received doctrines. Nor are the differences between the main figures of Islamic philosophy (e.g., al-Fārābī and Avicenna) attributable only to different Greek and neo-Hellenistic schools of thought (e.g., Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, etc.). Indeed one finds that even on theories of epistemology (see below) there is a gulf dividing these thinkers. In the general context of *falsafah* versus the traditional disciplines, the differences between the philosophers might have seemed like an irrelevant detail. But in the context of *falsafah* itself, the different

theories are what distinguish one philosopher from another. In his writings al-Ghazzālī picks out al-Fārābī and Avicenna as heretics for claiming, among other things, that God does not know particulars. It is doubtful that al-Ghazzālī was unaware of Avicenna's theory on God's knowledge of particulars (see below), but in any case it is telling that he does not think it worthwhile to point out the differences between al-Fārābī and Avicenna on this issue. In short *falsafah* was – and to some extent it still is – treated as a uniform discipline with individual distinguishing features being regarded as a marginal detail, and at best as clues for determining pre-Islamic influences on this philosopher or that. Generally, we have not succeeded yet in taking the philosophers in Islam seriously.

There were various attempts by the practitioners of *falsafah* to reconcile – at least ostensibly – their “body of knowledge”, or their “truth”, with that of the traditionalists. Regardless of the sincerity of their intentions, an entire body of epistemic discourse developed as a result of that attempt. Drawing partly on the Platonic imagery of the cave (where different shades of reality are postulated), and partly on Qur'ānic verses which confirm the need to use imagery for communicating truths, the philosophers attempted to show that there are different grades of truth, not different or conflicting truths. They also tried to show that rational truth was real truth, while other truths (including religious) were images of this truth. Naturally, this did not appease the committed practitioners of the religious sciences, but it seemed to satisfy the philosophers' quest for a compromise formula. (This imagery, by the way, was to be used by the fourth epistemic school, i.e., the mystics, to distinguish their kind of knowledge from that of the philosophers.)

Fourthly, there were the mystics. Theirs is a truly defiant theory, because it can be neither tested nor even described. There are different schools and shades of Sufi knowledge, but what is common to all of them is the claim that language obstructs, rather than communicates, understanding. To them, knowledge is a form of individual “taste”. It is the difference between being able to give a precise scientific definition of health and being healthy, or “to know” medically what being inebriated is and experiencing drunkenness, or to know down to the minutest detail what a town looks like and being able to walk in its streets and to see it as it really is. Inevitably, their theories are communicated through metaphor and imagery, rather than through definitive linguistic mechanisms. Often, poetry and stories are used to convey meanings rather than straightforward expositions. While frustrating to those trained in philosophy, their methods of communication draw upon precisely that imagery which the philosophers used to reconcile their “truth” with that of the practitioners of the religious sciences.



❧ THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF *KALĀM* ❧

Two major problems confront one when one attempts to provide at least a brief outline of *kalām* epistemology. The first problem has to do with the diversity of views held on the subject, not only between the two Classical schools (Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites) but also between adherents of the same school. The second problem is technical, in that we do not as yet possess a complete and consensus account of a *kalām* theory of knowledge. However, if one were to look beyond the details distinguishing one view from the next, and were to attempt to throw light on the main operating concepts and words that constituted the language of discourse in the subject, one could perhaps begin with the following itinerary: (1) disposition (*ḥāl*), meaning to-be-in-a-state-of-such-and-such; (2) generation (*tawlīd*), meaning in this context the rational operation which produces knowledge; and (3) repose (*sukūn al-naḥs*), meaning the psychological state of mind which is associated with the dispositional attitude (of being in a state of knowing). There may have been differences between various thinkers (whether in the same school or belonging to the two opposite schools) on how to understand or to explain these operating concepts, yet a definitive outline and appreciation of the significance of the different interpretations can be understood fully only against the entire intellectual frame of reference which the different thinkers operated in. For example, to appreciate why a specific thinker claimed that knowledge is or cannot be a disposition, one has to have a fuller view of his intellectual frame of reference, in which different ontological categories other than dispositional attitudes (e.g. substance, accident, cause, condition, etc.) were featured in specific ways. One often also finds that a particular thinker's definition of *ḥāl* (or disposition) – for example, whether it is an effect, a cause or a condition – is a function of that thinker's general intellectual frame of reference. Therefore, the following discussion must be viewed only as a tentative introduction to the universe of discourse in *kalām* epistemology, and not as a definitive outline of specific schools of thought in that universe.

How does *ḥāl* feature in a discussion about knowledge? Perhaps the simplest and most direct route to answer this question is to view it in the context of a subject (perhaps even a substance) and a state (perhaps even an accident). One asks oneself the question, in what sense is the state attributable to the subject? (Or in what sense does this kind or category of accident pertain to this kind or category of substance?) To ask such a question would be as much as to ask, in what sense is knowledge attributable to a person?

*Ḥāl* can perhaps best be described as the being-in-such-and-such-a-state. Among the thinkers who asserted the meaningfulness or existence of such a category, there were differences concerning whether such a category

had the same application to living agents as to inanimate objects. Some would argue, for example, that the accident's-being-an-accident, or the substance's-being-in-existence, or even the accident's-being-a-colour, are all on a par with a living organism's-being-alive, its-being-in-a-state-of-hearing, or its-being-in-a-state-of-knowing. Others would claim that the last three examples are distinct from the first three, in that they clearly presuppose life in the substance/subject to which they pertain. In general, those who wished to give *ḥāl* a distinct status in their intellectual frames of reference would argue that *ḥāl* (plural *ahwāl*) can be said to pertain only to living agents. The rest would better be described as attributes, or at best – if further specifications are needed – as *akwān* (singular, *kawn*), which are specific attributes/accidents of movement, rest, conjunction and separation.

Yet to have made this distinction as one which, in the final analysis, seems to be that of different ontic categories of accidents, is only to have introduced the rich variety of subtle distinctions used in this discipline. Primarily, however, it was generally agreed that states (dispositional attitudes) attributable to live agents had to fulfil certain specifications relating to their causal mode. The issue therefore was, given the subject (the agent) and the disposition (the state-of-knowing), in what sense can we understand the coming-to-be of the disposition in the subject? The being-white of a table is caused, and the-being-in-a-state-of-knowing is also caused, but surely the modes of causality in the two examples are different. It is to address these questions that the concept of generation (*tawlid*) seems to have been evolved, as a specific type of causal implication.

To recapitulate: to know something, or “the-knowing-of-something” is an accident that comes to pertain to a subject. However, accidents are of different categories. If the accident in question is a dispositional attitude that pertains to a living agent, then it can be called a *ḥāl*. Even so, distinctions can still be made out between various sub-groups of such dispositional attitudes. For example, to be in a state of pain, or to feel pain, is not the same as to be in a state of knowledge, or to be in a state of believing such-and-such: in the first example, pain can be sensed in a particular location (the *maḥall*, or location, where the *ḥāl* so to speak subsists and can be physically identified), whereas in the second example the *maḥall* of knowledge/belief is said to be the person (the *jumlah*) as a whole rather than a specific physical location in that person. To be in a state of desire (to desire such-and-such) can analogously to the pain example be argued to relate at least in some instances to a physical location: thus to say “I know such-and-such”, or “So-and-so finds himself in a state of believing such-and-such” is not quite the same as to say “I feel such-and-such” or “So-and-so finds herself in a state of desiring/feeling such-and-such” since one cannot or should not identify a physical location as the subject of the state of knowledge/belief, whereas one can at

least in some cases identify physical locations wherein the desire/feeling is experienced. Perhaps, to make out the distinction in clearer or more contemporary terms, one can point out that it is possible in one case to say *where* it hurts (one senses the pain), or *which part* of the body senses the feeling of, say, hunger, whereas such localizations in the case of knowledge are less appropriate to make.

These sub-distinctions are perhaps relevant only to the extent that they underline the primarily operational nature of knowledge/belief: that the state of knowledge is an active dispositional state of the person, as opposed perhaps to its being a passive or perhaps even a neutral dispositional state. Above all, the distinctions set out knowledge in terms of *dispositional states*. Perhaps one should point out here that, contrary to *kalām* epistemologists, the philosophers and even mystics spoke of knowledge in terms of *final* states, or as the end-products of a process (see below). According to them knowledge is *something* which one acquires after or through a process (the subject being the mind or the soul rather than the person). Thus, although being an attribute, it is somehow made out as something (an existential category) which is distinct from the person, and which the person comes to acquire, in part or in whole. Such a description obviously lends knowledge an objective status, whereas the *kalām* description ties it very tightly to subjective states.

Typically, a dispositional state (a *ḥāl*) is one which agents find themselves as having. Thus agents find themselves as being in the state of knowing, and are able to distinguish themselves as being in such a state partly by their ability to distinguish their being in such a state from their not being in such a state, and partly by their ability to distinguish this state from others which they find themselves as being in. Such abilities to distinguish are argued by *kalām* thinkers to be direct or immediate. This is like saying that one just happens to know when one believes something, is thinking about it or knows it. The question, therefore, What is knowledge?, or What is it to know something? is first answered in terms of a dispositional state which is immediately distinguishable by the person who experiences it. One simply *finds* oneself being in such a state.

In order to address the second main question, namely, how to explain the acquisition of such a state, or how does one happen to come by finding oneself in such a state after not having had it first, the concept of generation (*tawlīd*) was introduced, as a process of reasoning leading to knowledge. *Kalām* thinkers distinguished naturally between immediate and acquired knowledge, but did not expend too much effort on trying to make the distinction in terms of the objects of knowledge in the Classical way that the philosophers did (for example by saying that some truths are by their nature immediately perceptible). Their main concern was to try to explain how one comes by knowledge. How is it that one comes by finding oneself being in such-and-such-a-state? Their answer



was that reason generates knowledge, in the sense that the state of knowing such-and-such can be acquired only if a methodical process of considering the right kind of evidence in the right kind of way is applied. On this view, "aborted" generation can be due only to one or another of these conditions being absent: that methodical reasoning was not used, that not the right evidence was considered, or that not the right manner of considering this evidence was used. Strictly speaking, on this view, to "learn a truth" from someone else cannot be considered as acquiring knowledge. Similarly, "to recollect a truth" is not necessarily the same as recalling a state of knowledge. Assuming normal conditions, so to speak, only a person engaged methodically in reasoning about the right kind of evidence will find himself or herself in the state of knowing such-and-such. Merely to recollect a truth without the reasoning that led to it, or to be told a truth, is thus not to be in a state of knowledge.

The third operative concept in this discourse about knowledge sheds still further light on the subject: *sukūn al-nafs*, or repose of the soul, is the psychological confidence a person feels which is associated with being in a state of knowledge. This is the confidence that what one believes to be the case is in fact the case, or that no further search is needed. Indeed, more explicitly, knowledge is depicted by *kalām* thinkers as a kind of belief, distinguished partly by its having been arrived at in a specified methodical manner, and partly by the additional psychological criterion of confidence that the person feels regarding this belief.

One does not find in *kalām* literature too much concern for establishing – or arguing for or explaining – for example a correspondence relation between subject and object, or between a person's believing such-and-such to be the case and its being in fact the case. Knowledge is primarily addressed as a dispositional attitude, a subjective state of the mind, and the effort to explain it is made precisely in terms of its being such a subjective state. Thus it is first of all distinguished from other dispositional states of the person (*aḥwāl*, *akwān*, *ṣifāt*, etc. – see above) and then from other dispositional states of the mind (being ignorant of, suspecting, doubting, etc.). Having thus depicted it as an attitudinal state of the mind which one finds oneself as experiencing (rather than as an object itself whose knowledge presupposes and explains knowledge of items other than itself), it is then simply explained in terms of the confidence an agent feels in the truth of what he or she believes (which makes knowledge similar to ignorance), as well as in terms of the method used by the agent in acquiring this belief.

❧ FALSAFAH EPISTEMOLOGY ❧

Unlike *kalām* thinkers, whose intellectual efforts in the subject give the impression at least of being indigenous, the philosophers operated within the framework of a transmitted system or systems, and their contributions or originality can be understood against this background. Broadly speaking, one can perhaps distinguish between two main streams of thought in *falsafah* epistemology, represented by al-Fārābī and Avicenna. In many ways, Avicenna's epistemology is closer to *kalām*, while al-Fārābī's is closer to the Neoplatonic system. In al-Fārābī, the epistemic order reflects or corresponds to the ontic order. The world is neatly described in terms of a terrestrial and an extraterrestrial order. The extraterrestrial order consists of a progressively elevated ontology of heavenly bodies and minds (intellects) whose pinnacle is the Prime Mover, or God. The sublunar order consists of a progressively regressing ontology of animate and inanimate objects reaching as far down as the four main elements. At the top of the sublunar ontological order stands humanity, while at the beginning of the extraterrestrial order the moon stands associated with the Active Intellect, God's contact with the terrestrial world. Everything in the world is made up of matter and form, the essence and meaning of each object being its form. Terrestrial forms originate in the Active Intellect and subsist there eternally, there being virtually no epistemic difference between the totality of forms originating in the Active Intellect as an object of knowledge and the Active Intellect itself as an eternally active cognizant subject. Standing at the top of the terrestrial pyramid humanity strives for and can achieve perfection (happiness, eternity) through the pursuit of knowledge. As knowledge is knowledge of meanings/essences/forms, the more a human being cognizes and collects forms the more similar he or she becomes to the Active Intellect. This similarity, reaching almost total fusion, is a function partly of the sameness of forms as objects of knowledge in both cases, and partly of the principle adopted by al-Fārābī that in acts of cognizance the subject and object of knowledge are fused into one.

The epistemic journey towards fusion with the Active Intellect and the achievement therefore of happiness begins at the bottom of the ladder with a material intellect that stands ready to cognize material forms (forms subsisting in matter) but has not yet done so. It is thus a potential intellect rather than an intellect-in-act. Once a form is cognized (thus undergoing a transformation in its own status, *qua* the intellect cognizing it, from being an intelligible-*in-potentia* to becoming an intelligible-in-act), the intellect becomes an intellect-in-act. This intellect-in-act is material because the form it has cognized subsists in matter. However, as the intellect transcends in its epistemic journey, apprehending material forms and then, through a series of abstractions, beginning to cognize

immaterial (or abstract) forms, it becomes an immaterial intellect. Given the finite framework of reference in which the intellect operates, the epistemic quest has an end which is the acquisition of all or nearly all the forms that are potentially cognizable. At that stage, the human intellect comes to be in possession of the same "data" as that inhering in the Active Intellect, and a state of fusion or sameness between the two is achieved, explained by the principle of the fusion or sameness of the subject and object of knowledge. There may be some subtle distinctions introduced at this stage (the distinction between the acquired intellect as a perfection of the human immaterial intellect and the Active Intellect as a part of the heavenly order, as well as the additional possession, by the Active Intellect, of forms abstracted from a higher ontological order), but the bottom line is that the human intellect can achieve a sense of fusion with the Active Intellect, and can thus acquire its characteristics of eternity and happiness.

Avicennan epistemology, in contrast, denies the principle of fusion between subject and object of knowledge (thus forestalling Farābīan conclusions and theories relating to the achievement of final happiness and eternity). Furthermore, and in a series of ideas that can be truly described as ingenious, Avicenna tries to depict a theory of knowledge that is distinctively subjectivist. Whatever the ontological status of forms in the material world, forms in the intellect in any case have a distinct ontological status, in such a way that the immediate objects of intellectual cognition are not what exist in the external world. These intellectual forms are further transformed once they become logically categorized, so that the logical objects of thought and discourse are quite distinct from external as well as mental/intellectual objects. In a sense, the categorization of logical objects in a certain way (the framework of knowledge) is not a reflection of sacrosanct or eternal truths in the world (an ontic order), and it is not set up the way it is owing to an inner code of relations of essences, but it is a causal and contingent product of the intellectual effort at understanding the world. Even in the world itself objects or relations are not the way they are because of an inner code of essences, but are a causal and contingent product of God's Providence. Avicenna does not deny forms as essences, but after ascribing to them the status of subsistence as indeterminate things, their subsistence in the material or logical worlds in specific ways ceases to be regarded as *essentially* necessary, and retains only a *causal* necessity. The "Classical" school would have argued that objects might or might not have existed, but their being *what* they are is due to an inner cause which is their essence. Fire might not have existed, but given that it exists its essence necessitates that it have such-and-such qualities. In contrast, Avicenna held that not only is an object's essence contingent to it, but more radically that the essence being of such-and-such a description is also a contingent matter. Therefore, not only



is fire's existence contingent on God's causing it to come to be, but also the character of its essence is also contingent on God's causing it to have this description. In the al-Fārābīan model the formal order in the Active Intellect becomes manifest in the external world and is then imprinted as that order in the human intellect. In the Avicennan model forms have no order in the Active Intellect, and their manifestation in a specific order in the external world or their categorization in a specific order by the human intellect is an expression of one of several logical possibilities. Indeed, the forms (the essences) themselves subsist as such only in the Active Intellect, but not in the material world. They are not therefore abstracted (as in the Fārābīan model) from the external material world. Images of particulars are indeed cognized, and the intellect performs the active function of unification and differentiation. However, this function is integrated with the Active Intellect, in that the presentation of a particular image enables the human intellect to cognize an abstract form emanating from above. Given that neither particular images from the material world nor abstract forms from the Active Intellect are relational in themselves (that they do not have an inherent order), the construction of the objects of knowledge (the logical order) by the human intellect becomes a non-definitive exercise, i.e., an exercise in opinion-formation rather than in the acquisition of knowledge strictly so-called. Like *kalām* thinkers, Avicenna thus subsumes knowledge under the category of belief.

Perhaps because of the absence of a formal order, the intuitive faculty (the capability to be inspired) plays a major part in the Avicennan epistemic system. Intellects vary in their receptivity to intuition, and these variations (whether in terms of number or of speed) explain the movement from premisses to conclusions (i.e., the acquisition of knowledge). The intellect has to apply itself methodically to evidence, but there is no internal or independent mechanism associated with this application that guarantees the arrival at results. Avicenna's point here seems to be that inspiration is a necessary condition for the arrival at a result, and that perspiration alone is not sufficient. There are various degrees in this intuitive ability, reaching the point where the human intellect is ever-ready to receive forms emanating from the Active Intellect, or where it is in a state of semi-constant inspiration. This intuitive faculty, at its zenith, is a holy or prophetic faculty. Avicenna argues in this context that once the human intellect reaches this point it would not be impossible for it to start perceiving images of particulars from other times, in particular from the future. However, in general Avicenna argues that the human intellect is almost always burdened by its association with bodily matters, and it cannot therefore achieve epistemic perfection (or happiness, etc.) until after becoming relieved, as a soul, from the human body. Once again, in this Avicenna seems to hold a view that is at variance with that of al-Fārābī, and closer to the Islamic tradition.

For Avicenna the knowledge of something must proceed on the basis of methodical reasoning, the result must be inspired, and ideally the intellect must be cognizant of this step-by-step process to be truly said to have knowledge. However, such knowledge can be recollected without detailed cognizance of the steps that led to it, and it can be transmitted to others. One assumes that this variety of categories of knowledge in Avicenna is possible given the overall framework of knowledge being a form of belief, which can therefore be manifested in different epistemic states of the mind.

### ❧ GOD'S KNOWLEDGE OF PARTICULARS ❧

One cannot end this brief presentation on epistemology without quickly referring to the controversy which arose concerning God's own knowledge of the material world. Once again, two main views can be distinguished here, the "Classical" Fārābīan view which held that God cannot know particulars, and the Avicennan view which tried to explain how God in fact knows particulars through the intermediation of that particular's species. In trying to put up a theory explaining how God knows particulars in a universal way (that not an atom's worth in the heavens or earth escapes his knowledge), Avicenna was once again closer than al-Fārābī to the Muslim/religious tradition.

The theory Avicenna seems to have evolved consists of several elements, parts of which have some points in common with the Theory of Descriptions. The first element in the theory, however, has something to do with "causal knowledge", or with knowledge of particular effects through knowledge of principles or general causes. Given that God knows these general principles and their interaction with one another, He can therefore also know the particular effects these lead to in the context of time (i.e., their occurrence in time). This causal knowledge, Avicenna claims, is universal (presumably since it is a knowledge of a conditional). However, Avicenna seems to distinguish here between knowledge *of* a particular and knowledge *about* a particular. The distinction has to do with whether the particular is one of a kind. If it is (e.g., like the sun) then God can have knowledge of it (through its description). If, however, it is not one of a kind, then God can know about it through a description, but God cannot be ascribed with knowledge *of* it, since this can only be acquired through ostensive reference in the first place.

In this second case, the ability according to which reference to (and therefore knowledge about) a particular can be achieved is explained through postulating two related "universal" truths or items of knowledge. The example Avicenna uses in this context is that of an eclipse: of any particular eclipse it is possible to provide (know) an entire account of

specific descriptions (spatial as well as temporal). In God's case, this account is presumably possible in the causal sense already referred to. The condition here is that these spatial and temporal descriptions are part of the knowledge (the predicate), and are not limiting parameters of the intellect having that knowledge (the subject). Avicenna argues, in another context, that even particular statements are eternally true if their particularity is regarded as a feature of the predicate instead of its being a condition which is external to the statement or a characterization of the subject.

This entire account of specific descriptions, however, is universal in that it is predicable of more than one eclipse. In order for this description or universal account to be said to have a reference function, Avicenna adds a second item, namely, the knowledge that this described eclipse is only one. God can thus be said to know a particular by knowing that particular's description and by knowing, in addition, that this description happens to be true of only one. Interestingly, it is the combination of these two items as an explanation that is reminiscent of the Theory of Descriptions. Avicenna pointedly adds that, even armed with this knowledge, it would be impossible to determine of this particular eclipse whether it is the eclipse one had knowledge *about*. This is like arguing that I could know everything about the thief who broke into my house, but I cannot determine of this person, whom I now see before me, if he or she is the person who did it. Clearly, knowledge based on ostension is different from knowledge based on description, but both kinds can still be argued to be knowledge about particulars.

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