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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'ānic text) assumes a literal importance – with varieties of this view at one end upholding a totally literal understanding of the Qur'ān; 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'ān. 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'ānic 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 jurisprudent 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 jurisprudents, 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 exegesists, the jurisprudents, 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 jurisprudent (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 Muʿtazilites and the Ashʿarites), 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