

# STVDIA ISLAMICA

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## AL-'AQL AL-QUDSĪ : AVICENNA'S SUBJECTIVE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

I intend in this paper to show, through a successive series of textually based steps, that if one puts together a number of different points which Avicenna makes in connection with epistemology, one will come out with a coherent theory of knowledge which is, in a fundamental sense, subjective and unverifiable.

1. I shall introduce the topic through two passages from Avicenna's major work, *al-Shifā'*: The following passage is from the psychological part of that work:

"Amongst things that are known and evident is the fact that intelligible matters which are acquired are acquired only by means of the middle-term of a syllogism. The middle-term occurs in either of two ways. Sometimes it is intuited—where intuition is an act of the brain whereby it infers by itself the middle-term... and sometimes it is learnt. But the principals of learning are intuitions, so that things are inevitably based on intuitions which were inferred by the masters of intuition, and which were conveyed thereafter to people who learn."<sup>(1)</sup>

(1) Although I draw exclusively on Avicenna's major work *al-Shifā'* in this paper, in fact his views as I present them here are quite consistent with his views as expressed in his other works, and in fact they are arguably even more consistent with his views as these are expressed in his mystical works. In this sense, it is arguable that it is not the case that there are two Avicennas, one rational and the second mystical, but that there is one Avicenna who once uses rational, and then mystical/poetic means to express the same views. In order to simplify the use of references in this paper, I shall use the following abbreviations:

*Introduction for al-Madkhal of al-Shifā'*, G. C. Anawati *et al.*, eds., introduction by I. Madkour. Cairo, 1952.

*Psychology for al-Nafs of al-Shifā'*, Ed. F. Rahman. London: Oxford University Press, 1959.

In the logical part of the same major work, Avicenna again emphasizes the central role of the middle-term in his theory of knowledge. He says,

"Judgemental knowledge-with-certainty consists in believing, regarding a thing, that it is so and in believing that it can not but be so. This (second) belief has to have occurred in such a manner that it cannot cease to be entertained. If it is self-evident, then it cannot cease to be entertained. If it is not self-evident, it would be such that it cannot cease to be entertained only if it were to have been acquired from the first occurrence of the middle-term."<sup>(2)</sup>

Thus Avicenna's theory of knowledge seems to depend, in a very fundamental sense, on the act of intuition of middle-terms. In order to arrive at the knowledge of something previously unknown—for example the relation, if it exists, between the minor and major terms—then something over and above the mere presence of these two terms seems to be necessary, namely, the intuition of a third term that connects or disconnects between them. Avicenna explains this intuition in his *De Anima* in the case where only a single person is involved, as consisting in the aptitude (*islī'dād*) to learn. He says that "this aptitude may become so intensive in some people to the extent that the person who has it will not require much in order for him to contact the Active Intellect... and this state of the material intellect must be called a holy intellect (*'aql qudsī*)"<sup>(3)</sup>

Other passages in this chapter confirm that Avicenna considered intuition to consist of varying inspirational degrees culminating in *al-'aql al-qudsī*, which is the highest of the human faculties, and which is the highest mode of prophecy. Once again, however, Avicenna emphasises the role of the middle-term in the context of prophetic knowledge (and therefore in the context of intuition) when he says that the forms (*ṣuwar*) which the holy intellect receives from the Active Intellect are arranged in such a manner as to contain the middle-terms. It is clear from the above that for Avicenna, judgemental knowledge (which is essentially the know-

ledge that B belongs or does not belong to A, whether wholly or in part) requires an element that is quite distinct from A and from B. Furthermore this element, namely, the middle-term, is introduced in the theory through the instrument of intuition. In its turn, intuition is a form of readiness to receive forms—one might say, to receive *inspiration*; reaching, in its highest mode, to the prophetic ability to receive *revelation*.

These two obviously fundamental aspects of Avicenna's theory of knowledge—i.e. that it is intuitive and that this intuition is or seems to be inspirational/revelational in nature—obviously give rise to the question of whether any room is left for a rational and objective assessment or verification of knowledge. In other words one is led, through a very obvious process of reasoning, to the question of whether the foundations of Avicenna's theory of knowledge, like those of al-Ghazali after him, are rooted in faith rather than in reason.

It seems to me that this can be shown to be the case if it can be shown that Avicenna's theory does not leave any room in it for a rational verification of knowledge. If an item of knowledge cannot be empirically confirmed or disconfirmed, then all that one would be left with is the inspirational light of the Active Intellect shining on us, rather analogously to the way that it was a light which God cast into his breast that provided grounds for al-Ghazali's certainty of his knowledge.<sup>(4)</sup>

Therefore I shall proceed to show, through what I hope will be obviously successive steps, that Avicenna did not hold knowledge to be empirically or *objectively* verifiable (i.e. capable of being confirmed or disconfirmed). This I shall do by considering two possible domains of verification, the physical or empirical, and the analytical or conceptual. All the propositions which will be used in the process will either be directly or indirectly but obviously supported by textual evidence.

2. The first Avicennian proposition to be considered here is the following: that *the roots of human knowledge are intuitions*. The passages already cited confirm the appropriateness of ascribing this view to Avicenna. By the word "roots" I simply mean the foundations from which knowledge is said to be acquired.

(4) See the English translation of his *Deliverance From Error*, in M.W. Watt's *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali* (George Allen & Unwin, London, 4th Imp. 1970), p. 25-6.

*On Demonstration for al-Burhān of al-Shifā'*, Ed. A. E. Afifi. Cairo, 1964.

*Metaphysics for al-Ilāhiyyāt of al-Shifā'*, Ed. G. C. Anawati & S. Zayed. 2 vols. Cairo, 1960.

See *Psychology* 249 for the above-quoted passage.

(2) *On Demonstration* 256. This knowledge is "*al-yaqīn min al-'ilm al-laṣṭiqī*."

(3) *Psychology* 248. Note in this context that the holy intellect is the highest aspect of the material intellect.

Avicenna's second proposition is this: *the source of intuitions is the Active Intellect*. Again, what I mean by the word "source" is quite literally the immediate origin of the middle-term which connects or disconnects between two other terms. By stating that this source is the Active Intellect Avicenna implicitly denies two other possible sources. The first possible source is the external world of sensible objects. The second possible source are the minor and major terms themselves between which the connection (or disconnection) is to be made. Avicenna says,

"It is possible then that a person be so supported in his soul by the intensity of purity, and the intensity of contact with the intellectual principles that he is set aglow with intuition, that is, with the acceptability of them from the Active Intellect in everything. The forms in the Active Intellect will then be depicted in him either instantaneously or almost instantaneously, not in a traditional manner but in a manner which contains the middle-terms."<sup>(5)</sup>

This clearly shows that the act of intuition has its source not in the sensible objects of the external world, but in the Active Intellect itself. In sum, then, the first two propositions say that to know is to intuit, and to intuit is to be ready to receive or to accept connections between ideas from the Active Intellect.

These two propositions seem to imply a further thesis, namely, that the subject-matter of knowledge has to be distinct from the external world of sensible objects. Because, if knowledge is defined in terms of the intuition of a connection or disconnection or disagreement between two ideas (or between the major and minor terms), then the *primary* objects of knowledge come by definition and perforce to be precisely those ideas (or those terms), instead of the physical objects of the external world. In its turn, what such a thesis would amount to is the subjectivist claim that what we have direct access to, and what we can hold direct or primary discourse about are mental entities rather than objects in the external world. Re-phrased, this implied thesis can now be stated as Avicenna's *third* proposition, as follows: *the primary objects of knowledge are forms in the human intellect*.

Besides this being a clear implication from the first two propositions, it is in fact directly supported by the following textual evidence from Avicenna's metaphysical work in *al-Shifā'*:

(5) *Psychology* 249-50. Also, see below, No. 22 for a comment on "being aglow with intuition".

"It is clear that the object of information must have some kind of existence in the soul, and information *in reality* is about what exists in the soul, and it is only *secondarily* about sensible objects in the external world."<sup>(6)</sup>—my emphases.

In fact, Avicenna's third proposition can be supported by a number of correlated theses which he presents in his works, including his distinction between the pair, particular/universal and the pair, part/whole (*kullī/juz'ī* vs. the pair *kull/juz'*), or between accidental (*'araḍī*) and accident (*'araḍ*), etc., where he constantly stresses the difference between, say, particulars and universals on the one hand as logical objects which are defined entirely in terms of logical specifications, and between parts and wholes on the other hand which are nothing other than substances and the matter and form which constitutes them.<sup>(7)</sup> A substance in the external world would be constituted of matter and form, but because neither of these are predicable of substances, and because, in contrast, it is particulars that play the role of subjects in propositions, a distinction immediately appears in the Avicennian model between the particular as a subject of predication (and therefore as the object of information or of knowledge), and the substance—i.e., the actual physical object—as a whole (*kull*) which is made up of the parts form and matter.

We can now proceed to the *fourth* proposition: we have said that the primary objects of knowledge are mental entities, and

(6) *Metaphysics* 34.

(7) *Introduction, passim* for the distinction between, e.g., accident (*'araḍ*) and accident-as-predicate (*'araḍī*). Avicenna's concern is to distinguish between logical means of specification and of discourse on the one hand, and material attributes or qualities inhering in physical objects on the other. He argues that there is a set of terms (particular, universal, being-a-genus, accident-as-predicate, etc.) used in logical discourse which specify logical entities. These entities do not exist in the material world. Avicenna returns especially to the distinction between the pair part/whole and the pair particular/universal in *Metaphysics* 207ff. His comments in this context are very illuminating. A physical object in the external world is constituted of matter and form. Thus matter and form are parts of the object. The object itself is a whole. In this sense, a whole (*kull*) is not a particular (*juz'ī*), and a universal (*kullī*) is not a part (*juz'*). However, since it is the particular which is the logical object of specification, and since it is through the universal that the particular is specified, it its perforce not the physical object which comes to present itself as our immediate object of knowledge. Note in this context that the distinction between *'araḍ* and *'araḍī* already prepares the ground for this thesis. The predicate which is both *'araḍī* and *kullī*, is not the form (*ṣūrah*) which is both a *'araḍ* and a *juz'*.

we have seen that at least one category of such entities (the middle-term) is not rooted in the physical world, but has its source rather in the Active Intellect. The question that may now be raised is whether the source of the other categories of mental entities is not the physical world. Another way of looking at this is to wonder whether the intelligible objects of knowledge which one acquires are acquired from the physical world in so far as they exist in it. However, Avicenna's answer to this may be expressed as follows, namely, that *quiddities/intelligibles do not exist in the external world of sensible objects*. This is a rather prominent feature of Avicenna's philosophy, and it distinguishes him from any other philosophers in the Islamic tradition, including *al-Fārābī*.<sup>(8)</sup> He continually repeats this dictum in a number of places, as for example when he says,

(8) The following is a brief summary of *al-Fārābī*'s view, as this is presented in his "Epistle Concerning the Intellect", ed. M. Bouygues (Beyrouth: Imprimerie Catholique, 1948), pp. 3-37: there is a gradual and rational procession of the human intellect in its pursuit of knowledge, which can be described in terms of four distinct stages.

First, the human intellect can be a potential intellect in the sense of its being "a certain soul, or part of a soul, or one of the faculties of the soul, or something whose essence (*dhātuha*) has been prepared, or is prepared to extract (*tantazi'*) the quiddities (*māhiyyāt*) of all existents, and their forms without their matter, thus making them a form, or forms for it..." (p. 12). *al-Fārābī* states that these quiddities which are extractable from objects, and which have not yet been extracted by a potential intellect, are potential objects of the intellect themselves, or potential intelligibles (*ma'qūlāt bi 'l-quwwah*). In this first stage, therefore, the quiddities are potential intelligibles, and the intellect is a potential intellect.

Second, "...once the forms of existents occur in (that) essence in the manner we have described, then that essence becomes an intellect-in-act..." (p. 15). In this second state, therefore, the human intellect has in fact extracted the forms of existents, and has for that reason become an actual intellect rather than being a mere potential intellect. However, *al-Fārābī* further states that the forms or quiddities which are now actual objects of thought of the intellect-in-act are for that reason no longer potential intelligibles, but actual intelligibles. In this second stage, therefore, the human intellect is an actual intellect, and the quiddities or forms are actual intelligibles.

Third, the quiddities or forms which are now actual intelligibles are separate existents in their own right, in so far as they are independent objects of thought, and no longer mere shadows of the objects from which they were extracted. In so far as they are separate existents in their own right, they can themselves be intellects, now as actual intelligibles. "When the intellect-in-act intellects those intelligibles which are forms for it in so far as they are actual intelligibles, then the intellect about which we used first to say that it is an intellect in act now becomes the acquired intellect." (p. 20). In this stage, therefore, the human intellect has

"There is no single common man-ness which exists in the external world which is such that it is the man-ness of Zayd and of 'Amr."<sup>(9)</sup>

This fourth proposition makes it senseless of course to speculate on whether the source of intelligibles is the sensible world, as it is obvious from the fact that they do not exist in the sensible world that they cannot be acquired from it. Avicenna's answer to the question, where, then, do intelligibles come from? can be expressed in the following *fifth* proposition: *Intelligibles are not extracted or derived from sensible objects in the sensible world. Rather, they are received from the Active Intellect*. We can find textual evidence in support of this proposition in the following comments:

"If the theoretical faculty regards the particulars which are in the imagination, and the light of the Active Intellect shines on them in us as we have stated, then they change into being abstracted from matter and its concomitants, and they become imprinted in the rational soul—not in the sense that *they themselves* become transported from the imagination to the intellect in us... but in the sense that observing them prepares the soul to receive what is abstract from the Active Intellect which emanates it."<sup>(10)</sup> (my emphasis)

become a second-order actual intellect, while the object of intellection has become a second-order actual intelligible.

Fourth, the stage of reaching the acquired intellect is the final one in the process of intellectual ascension. "At this stage, the substance (*jawhar*) of the human being, or the human being *qua* being of the substance he is, becomes the closest thing to the Active Intellect. This is ultimate happiness and the after-life, namely, that the last stage of the human being as a substance occurs to him, and his final perfection occurs to him." (p. 31). *al-Fārābī* defines the Active Intellect as that power or cause by virtue of which the potential intellect can gradually ascend to becoming the acquired intellect. He uses the sun-image to explain that the Active Intellect provides light *both* so that the eye can see, and the object can be seen. He says that the intelligibles, forms or quiddities which constitute the subject-matter of the human intellect are potentially present in the Active Intellect *in the sense that* "...the Active Intellect has the capability of making (*yaj'aluhā*) these forms in matter...". "Thus it is the Active Intellect which makes these forms in matter, and it then gradually seeks (*yelaharrā*) to make them approximate to separability until the acquired intellect occurs." (p. 31).

(9) *Psychology* 237.

(10) *Ibid.* 235. According to the picture as Avicenna presents it, physical objects in the external world provide our sensory apparatus with particular images which have not been totally freed of material concomitants. However, it is not from these images that universals are extracted. Rather, the occurrence of these images in us prepares us to acquire the universal whose actual source is quiddity within the Active Intellect.

