

## SOME NOTES ON AVICENNA'S EPISTEMOLOGY\*

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As it is known, although epistemology is not wholly dealt with in the early Greek philosophers, forefathers of the philosophical thought, it is seen that «the source of knowledge», one of the important epistemological questions, is dwelled upon by them. For instance, Heracleitos based it upon senses and Parmenides upon reason. It seems to me that this view of Heracleitos, together with the diverse and irreconcilable nature of the early views about the prime and unchangable matter of the world and the increase in the demand for rhetoric as an art of convincing and persuading, natural outcome of Athenean democracy, is reflected in the views of the Sophists. We see various questions of epistemology discussed and the objective knowledge of reality denied for the first time by the Sophists. This negative attitude of the Sophists towards the validity of our knowledge is dealt with and criticized by Plato on his various dialogues. As a result, he came to the view that senses should be supported by reason in order to arrive at the true belief or the objective knowledge of reality. We see almost all the epistemological questions discussed by Plato, though not always with tangible results: «What is knowledge?» «What are its sources?» «How much of the things we think we know are really knowledge?». «What is the part played by reason in acquiring knowledge?» «What kind of relation is there between knowledge and true belief?».

Although almost all the epistemological questions are discussed by Plato, they are not dealt with under a separate heading in his dialogues. As far as I know, the first thinkers to assign an independent chapter to epistemology are Muslim theologians. Especially the early Muslim the-

ologians devoted the first part of their works to epistemology. The reason for this is to search for an answer to the question «whether we obtain the objective knowledge of reality and arrive thereby legitimately at the knowledge of God and His attributes». For this reason the criticism of the negative attitude of the Sophists towards knowledge occupies an important place in their works.

In Muslim philosophers following the Aristotelian tradition, especially in Fârâbî and Ibn Sînâ, epistemology is not taken up as a separate part of their philosophy. In the psychological parts of their works in which psychology and physiology overlap, some of the epistemological questions are taken up incidentally.

Our aim in this paper is to determine the extent of the rôle of reason in obtaining knowledge in the works of Ibn Sînâ and to draw attention to the resemblance between him and the theologians, though he is generally known to be rationalistic in his views.

For Ibn Sînâ, as an Aristotelian philosopher, there seems to be almost no question of the validity of our knowledge, because, in contrast to the theologians, he does not enter into any discussion of the subject, but he takes the objective nature of our knowledge for granted. He only draws our attention to the fact that the data produced by the imaginative and estimative faculties can not be relied upon, because these internal senses, as Avicenna calls them, generally distort the sense-perceptions.

What is important for him, just as for Aristotle, is not to inquire into the question to what extent our knowledge of the external world is valid, but to offer an explanation to such questions as how and where our knowledge which is taken for granted is produced.

For Ibn Sînâ, perception is a kind of abstraction, i.e., abstraction in various degrees of form from matter or material relations such as quantity, quality, space, situation, time etc.. Acts of abstraction produced in external senses (known as five senses) and in internal senses (constituted by common sense, phantasia, imaginative faculty and estimative faculty) are different in degree. These acts of abstraction reach their highest degree in the speculative intellect.

When we look into the views of the Muslim theologians, especially those of Bâqillânî and Imam al-Haramain al-Juwainî on perception, it is clearly seen that their views, though far from philosophical subtleties, are in essence very close to those of the philosophers. As it is known, Imâm al-Haramain al-Juwainî is contemporary of Ibn Sînâ. The above-mentioned Ash'arite theologians make an important distinction between

sensation and perception. In their view sensations such as hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch take place in an orderly manner according to God's habit. What produces knowledge in us is not sensation but perception. Sensation has nothing to do with perception. We can call sensation perception only in an allegorical sense. For example, in everyday speech we say «I smelled such and such a thing, but I did not perceive its smell; I tasted such and such a thing, but I did not perceive its taste; I touched such and such a thing, but I did not feel its heat». These examples clearly show that sensations are completely different in nature from perceptions. It is existence that makes perception possible, not the rays penetrating the eyes as regards the sense of sight, or the vibration of the air passing through the earholes as regards the sense of hearing or the feeling of the heat as regards the sense of touch. In other words, existence is the condition for perception.<sup>1</sup> In this respect perception differs from sensation. It is in this way that the theologians regard perception as a kind of abstraction, i.e., abstraction of the object of perception from its material relations and that they base their theological doctrine of the vision of God in the Hereafter upon this epistemological foundation. Just as our perception of things is not the perception of their material relations, so the vision of God is not like seeing a material object ; it is a spiritual perception. Despite all this, the Muslim theologians do not give human intellect or any other mental faculty an effective rôle in the mental perception of the external world and deny any idea of mental faculties. Even human intellect or reason is, for them, part of immediate perceptions. In the last analysis all these perceptions are produced in us through God's creation.

As it is seen in the above-mentioned brief explanation, both the Muslim theologians and philosophers roughly share the same epistemological view, though the words used by them are drastically different. The words used by them are different, because the former are on the one hand devoid of philosophical culture, as it is seen in their works, and on the other their view of nature is opposed to the philosophical view of matter and form. For example, the philosophers' view that matter in potency cannot have a beginning in time and that forms are the *raison d'être* of material objects cannot be reconciled with that of the theologians who deny the eternity of the world and the idea of form as an effective substance in the formation of external objects. It is also for this reason that they oppose the views of most of the Mu'tazilites and the philosophers who, by dividing the human soul into separate faculties, give them an

effective rôle in the production of knowledge and that they attach every kind of effectiveness to God's creation.

Despite this general appearance of the difference between the theologians and the philosophers, can we say with certainty that Ibn Sînâ, the outstanding representative of the Muslim philosophers, gives an effective rôle to the animal and human faculties of the soul, or does he give them only a verbal rôle, i.e., a rôle for the sake of explanation, because acts of perceiving and knowing take place in us? For example, although the theologians attach all kinds of knowledge to God's creation, as we have shown above, they, in explaining the acquired (kathbî) knowledge<sup>2</sup>, state that it is the kind of knowledge acquired through individual effort, even though this kind of knowledge, if not ultimately given by God, cannot be realized.

When we look into Ibn Sînâ's view closely, from the first stage of obtaining knowledge to the last, we see him making mention of divine inspiration for ordinary people and revelation for the prophets.

Even in the passages where Ibn Sînâ touches upon the peculiar characteristics of men and animals and propounds an excellent 'animal psychology' for his time, he attaches animal behaviours to divine inspiration.

On this subject Ibn Sînâ makes the following remarks: «Birds' making their nests and bees' making their honeycombs are not the outcome of rational investigation or reasoning, but that of divine inspiration and necessity. For this reason such actions of theirs do not differ; they produce such actions, not to better their conditions or because of an individual necessity, but because of specific necessity»<sup>3</sup>.

In another passage he says: «Even though it is alleged that (apart from men) all the other animated beings, for example, lions, abandon such acts as they can otherwise do, just as their abstention from eating their owners and youngsters, it cannot be said that these animal behaviours are engendered by a belief rooted in their souls. On the contrary, the reason for these behaviours is some other psychological condition. This condition is found in their creation and is the outcome of divine inspiration»<sup>4</sup>.

He also makes the following remarks: «The animal behaviours alleged to be produced by fear and hope are not due to their apperception of time or of things existing in time; on the contrary, they are also outcome of some divine inspiration»<sup>5</sup>.

According to Ibn Sînâ, human intellect makes use of the bodily faculties. Through the impressions acquired by these faculties it arrives at the universal concepts. For this, to use the terms of the theologians, it makes an effort to acquire knowledge. Ibn Sînâ makes mention of four kinds of mental operation :

1. Human intellect acquires separate universal concepts from the forms abstracted from their matters and material relations through determining between them resemblances and differences and separating their essential qualities from their accidental ones. During this operation it makes use of the imaginative and estimative faculties<sup>6</sup>. Human intellect is also capable of making one multiple and multiple one through the above operation. It uses this power in two ways :

a) It unites the concepts different and many as to their forms and identical as to their definition.

b) It unites genera and differentia through their definition. The opposite is true for the reverse operation.

It is in this respect that human intellect differs from animal faculties, because the latter perceive one as it is and many as they are. They can perceive, not the simple unity, but the unity as a whole composed of accidents and other qualities and can not abstract the essentials from accidentals. But the human soul has the capability of perceiving unity in plurality and plurality in unity, since it differentiates the essentials from the accidentals and the similars from the distinguishables. For instance, though Amr and Zaid, as an abstract concept, have the same humanness as to their definition, their humanness differs as to their individual characteristics. Moreover, human soul necessarily perceives time insofar as it perceives prior and posterior in things. But it perceives time in the present,\*\* because prior and posterior are found in the present, not in time. In the same way it perceives the result in a syllogism and the object of definition, though it arranges a syllogism and definition in time.<sup>7</sup>

2. Human intellect sets up a relationship between the separate universal concepts as regards negation and affirmation and forms negative and positive propositions. It takes the proposition unification of whose terms is evident as it is. It leaves the propositions not of this nature aside till acquiring the middle term.<sup>8</sup>

3. Human soul acquires experimental premisses. In the acquisition of these premisses sensation plays an important rôle. With the help of sensation a) we necessarily attribute a negative or a positive predicate to the subject as in the case of the propositions «man is a rational

animal» or «man is not a rational animal». b) we attribute to the subject a predicate contrary to it, as in the case of the proposition «man is not an irrational animal». c) we acquire the subsequent of a negative or a positive conjunctive conditional proposition, as in the case of the propositions «if it is day, it is light; if it is not day, it is not light», and d) we acquire a negative or a positive disjunctive proposition whose predicate is not contrary to its subject, as in the case of the propositions «it is either day or night; it is neither black nor white». Since this relation between subject and predicate is continuous, human soul feels reassured either by the necessary sequence of antecedent and subsequent or by the essentially contrary nature of antecedent and subsequent and it thereby acquires 'a belief' depending either on sensation or reasoning<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, human soul makes up a proposition upon observation of a fact through sensation, and with the help of reasoning it observes that this fact takes place frequently and that it is not a chance-event. For example, scammony effects a purge. Since we observe this frequently, it gets rooted in our memory. Thereupon we form the following reasoning: If the purgative effect of the scammony was not found in its nature, but was a chance-event, it would not be observed frequently<sup>10</sup>.

4. Human soul decides the truth of the news related uninterruptedly by many people<sup>11</sup>.

But it so seems that all these rational operations are only occasions for acquiring knowledge; knowledge is, in the last analysis, an inspiration or a revelation. Let us now try to prove this in Ibn Sînâ's own words.

According to Ibn Sînâ, human soul is like an empty tablet in its early state; it possesses a potential intellect. It acquires actual intellect later. Everything in potency needs something to actualise it. Therefore, in matters of intellection there is an actualising principle. This principle is the Active Intellect which preserves in itself the principle of the abstract rational concepts and gives them to the human soul. The relation of this intellect to our souls which are in potency is like that of the sun to our sense of sight. Just as the sun is actually observable and through its illumination it makes actually invisible things actually visible, so the Active Intellect has the same relationship as regards our souls<sup>12</sup>. The Active Intellect is both the very essence of the intelligibles and the principle which actualises the potential intelligibles. It is this Intellect which is both the intelligizing principle and the intelligibles<sup>13</sup>. Ibn Sînâ explains how this principle works in actualising the potential intelligibles in the following way: The forms delivered by the imaginative faculty to the rational faculty, since they are not yet purified from their material relations, are hidden under these relations just like the things found in

the dark. Just as the sun makes the invisible things visible through its light, so the Active Intellect makes these hidden abstract forms intelligible through its illumination. In other words, when the rational faculty conceives the particulars existing in the faculty of imagination and is illuminated by the Active Intellect, these particulars become abstracted from their matters and material relations, and they impinge upon the rational faculty<sup>14</sup>. This clearly shows that the rational faculty has no such active rôle as abstracting the particular forms delivered to it. The act of intellection by the rational faculty only makes the human soul ready to receive the abstract forms flowing from the Active Intellect upon it, since intellections, according to Ibn Sînâ, are the movements which make human soul ready to receive this flux of forms. This resembles in a way to the fact that the existence of the middle terms makes us ready to receive the results in a syllogism<sup>15</sup>.

As it is known, the Active Intellect also gives forms to the formless first matter. It has therefore two important functions independent of one another: a) to deliver the abstract rational concepts or forms to the human soul, and b) to give forms to the formless primary matter.

The function of the Active Intellect to help ordinary human soul conceive abstract forms may be qualified as inspiration and its function to deliver the prophets the knowledge of reality as revelation. Thus it is seen that the Active Intellect which is outside the human soul has the very function of the Archangel Gabriel. These inspirations and revelations may arise on a rational level as well as on an imaginative level. In the latter case the knowledge of reality is either delivered through symbols and allegories or as it is.<sup>16</sup> Even in the imaginative level the knowledge of reality flows from the Active Intellect or the Archangel Gabriel upon the imaginative faculty.

Unless human soul enters into communion with the Active Intellect, it remains in the level of material intellect. According to Ibn Sînâ, the acquisition of knowledge by the human soul through the Active Intellect and its conceiving the intelligibles is either indirect as in the case of learning from others or direct as in the case of the prophets and the saints. In people of direct perception or intellection the potential intellect is strong in the highest degree prior to any act of learning or prior to being ready to receive the intelligibles through the effect of the sensible forms. Ibn Sînâ calls this strong capacity 'intuition' or 'immediate apprehension'. For him the intensity of this capacity has degrees: In some people it is so strong that they do not need to exert much effort

and to get educated in order to communicate with the Active Intellect. So they have the capacity to receive the intelligible concepts besides the capacity of the absolutely potential intellect, and they appear to know everything directly in themselves. This is the highest degree of intuition and it is right to call this material intellect 'sanctified intellect' or 'the sanctified spirit'<sup>17</sup>.

Ibn Sînâ clarifies the direct and indirect perception in the following manner: Intelligible truths are acquired through the apprehension of the middle term in a syllogism. This happens in two ways: 1. through intuition; and 2. through learning. Intuition is a mental act which serves human mind to acquire the middle term by itself. To apprehend the middle term through learning from somebody and the formation of knowledge through this operation also depends, in the last analysis, upon intuition, because the middle term used in a science is for the first time apprehended by some person who has not so far had knowledge of it through intuition and transmitted to others through teaching. As regards quality and quantity, intuition has degrees. It has quantitatively different degrees, because some people acquire numerically more middle terms than others. It has also qualitatively different degrees, because some people apprehend the middle terms more quickly than others. Among the people we can see those who have no intuition at all as well as those who have it in the utmost degree. The former group may compensate for their imperfection through learning or may not compensate for it at all. The latter group is composed of those who have intuition in all subjects or in most of them and of those who obtain intuition in the shortest possible time<sup>18</sup>.

As it is seen, knowledge is not, in the last analysis, more than a kind of inspiration or revelation. In other words, it is the creation of God through a mediator. This conception of knowledge held by Ibn Sînâ brings him closer to that of the theologians. In my view, this important fact which justifies Ibn Rushd's charge against Ibn Sînâ that he made concessions to the theologians and the common folk facilitated in later times the close cooperation between philosophy and theology, and this cooperation finally resulted in the victory of theology over philosophy.



### FOOTNOTES :

1. Juwainī, Kitāb al-Irshād, ed. by M. Yūsuf Mūsa and others, Qairo 1950, pp. 173-175; cf., Bāqillānī, Kitāb at-Tamhīd, ed. by Abū Rīdah and others, Qairo 1366/1947, pp. 37-38.
  2. Juwainī, Kitāb ash-Shāmil, ed. by A. Sāmī an-Nashshār and others, Alexandria 1969, pp. 111 ff.; Bāqillānī, Tamhīd, p. 35; Insāf, ed. by al-Kawtharī, Qairo 1369/1950, p. 13; see also, Baghdādī, Usūl ad-Dīn, Istanbul 1346/1928, p. 8.
  3. Avicenna's De Anima, ed. by Fazlur Rahman, OWP 1970, p. 204.
  4. Ibid., pp. 204-205.
  5. Ibid., pp. 205-206.
  6. Ibid., pp. 221-222, 236; an-Najāt, ed. by al-Kurdi, Qairo 1331/1912, pp. 297-298.
  7. Avicenna's De Anima, pp. 236-237.
  8. Ibid., p. 222; Nejāt, p. 298.
  9. Avicenna's De Anima, p. 222; Najāt, p. 298.
  10. Avicenna's De Anima, s. 222; Najāt, p. 298; cf. pp. 94-95.
  11. Avicenna's De Anima, p. 222; Najāt, pp. 298-299.
  12. Avicenna's De Anima, pp. 234-235; cf., Najāt, pp. 315-316; Livre de Science, French tr. by M. Achena and H. Massé, vol. II, Paris 1958, p. 78.
  13. Nejāt, p. 316.
  14. Livre de Science, vol. II, p. 78; Avicenna's De Anima, p. 235.
  15. Avicenna's De Anima, p. 235.
  16. Ibid., pp. 174-176; Livre de Science, vol. II, p. 83.
  17. Avicenna's De Anima, pp. 248-249; Najāt, p. 272.
  18. Avicenna's De Anima, pp. 249-250; Najāt, pp. 272-274; cf. Livre de Science, vol. II, pp. 87-89.
- \* This paper has formerly been presented to the International Symposium on Ibn Turk Khwārazmī, Fārābī, and Ibn Sina held on September 9-12, 1985 by Atatürk Cultural Centre.
- \*\* The «present» or «now» has no extension according to the Aristotelians.