

Ontology and Epistemology: Where Islam clashes with the west

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2013-11-07

“Whatever you perceive and see in sleep has existence for you, even though no one else can see it. And whatever you do not see is unperceived and non-existent for you, even though all creation sees it!” – Al-Ghazzali¹

What is our reality and how do we know of its existence? Throughout the ages, philosophers, among them many Muslims, have grappled with conceptions of reality and knowledge of its existence for centuries, probing deeply into fundamental questions such as how does one know if one’s knowledge is correct and if one’s perceptions of reality are valid.

These issues arise in the areas of philosophy known as epistemology and ontology, both of which have been expounded by such great Islamic philosophers as Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. Epistemology deals with crucial questions of what constitutes valid knowledge and how one can obtain it, whereas Ontology considers questions of what constitutes reality and how one can understand existence. More simply put, our epistemology would be our answer to the question, “How can I know reality?” and our ontology would be our answer to the question, “What is reality?” As we shall see, Islam’s answers to these vital questions clashes with western views.

One’s personal epistemology and ontology, that is, one’s own theory of knowledge and view of reality, determine to a great extent, one’s approach to life and the problems it presents. If one’s epistemology is objectivist, then one believes that knowledge has an independent existence irrespective of whether or not one can acquire that knowledge. On the other hand, if one is a subjectivist, then one denies the independent existence of ultimate knowledge and holds that whatever we can know is colored by our collective socio-cultural views. Likewise, one is a realist, ontologically speaking, if one believes in the independent existence of reality, whether or not one is aware of it. Conversely, one is ontologically subjective if one believes reality is the result of human cognition and does not exist independently.²

One may rightly ask where Islam stands on these matters. Since Islam holds that Allah the Creator is eternal, and has sent prophets throughout the ages to guide people and has provided divine books of guidance for them to read, one could say that Islam has an objectivist epistemology (See Qur’an 10:35, which states Allah guides to the truth). At the same time, Islam (in particular Shi’a Islam) has subjectivist epistemological tendencies since it condones *ijtihad* (اجتهاد) or the derivation of ordinances based on interpretation of valid sources by religious scholars as necessary and appropriate for changing times and new technologies.

As far as ontology, Islam holds a realist view, that is, the independent existence of reality whether or not we are aware, since it testifies to the existence of creative and spiritual forces prior to the existence of humans (see Qur’an 2:31-32, which testifies to the existence of knowledge before the teaching of it to angels and the first human). Likewise, there is room for subjectivist ontology in Islam, since it is the Creator that has given us the ability to learn with our minds and senses, and has provided us with such necessities of life as food, housing, clothing and other provisions, thus allowing us to construct our own reality (see Qur’an 16:80).

In short, a practitioner of Islam, a Muslim, uses the epistemology of Allah (namely the Qur'an and Sunnah-Prophetic traditions) to know His ontology (existence).³ This approach places Allah at the center of the universe with the ultimate source of knowledge being His revelation. This is in sharp contrast with western anthropocentric views of epistemology and ontology which are heavily influenced by materialist notions of man and the universe, derived mainly from the rationalism of René Descartes. By postulating a theocentric world view and rejecting the greedy materialism of a shallow, consumer-oriented lifestyle, Islam clashes harshly with the west in both epistemology and ontology.⁴

However unlike Christianity and western secularism, Islam rejects the notion of an intrinsic conflict between the sciences and religious teachings. "Islam attempts to synthesize reason and revelation, knowledge and values in its approach," writes scholar Yadollah Dadgar of Tarbiat Modares University in Tehran, pointing out that in the west, the dominance of materialistic and mechanistic paradigms of science has weakened this synthesis. Muslim philosophers, unlike their western counterparts, were able to find a peaceful relationship between faith, science, reason and rationality.⁵ Of Muslim philosophers in general, scholar Amber Haque of the United Arab Emirates University in Al-Ain writes, "As opposed to the Greeks who had revolted from the Christian religious dogmas, Muslims actually reconciled religion with philosophy."⁶

Of the Islamic philosophers, perhaps the best known is Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Muhammad Al-Farabi (ابونصر محمد بن محمد الفارابي). Born in 872 in Khorasan, Iran and died in 950 in Aleppo, Syria, he was a Muslim scientist, philosopher, cosmologist, logician and musician. Of him, Majid Fakhry of Georgetown University writes, "Al-Farabi's contributions ... entitle him to a position of undoubted preeminence among the philosophers of Islam."⁷ Al-Farabi's treatises on the logic of Aristotle were a key element of the passing of this knowledge to Christian scholars in the middle ages, and had a great influence on later Islamic philosophers such as Ibn Sina, or Avicenna as he is known in the west. He even had a great influence on the thinking and philosophy of the Jewish sage, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, the Rambam, better known in the west as Maimonides, who said of Al-Farabi, "All his writings are faultlessly excellent."⁸ Also famous for The Great Book of Music (كتاب الموسيقى الكبير) kitab al-musiqi al-kabir), Al-Farabi has been called "The Second Teacher," that is, second only to Aristotle.⁹

Another great Muslim philosopher, theologian and mystic also from Khorasan, Iran is Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazzali (أبو حميد الغزالي), who was born in 1058, and died in Tus in 1111.¹⁰ wrote on human nature and discovering the self, which he described as consisting of qalb(قلب), ruh(روح), nafs (نفس) and aql (عقل) - roughly speaking, heart, spirit, soul and mind - all of which are considered spiritual entities. These are further subdivided, for example the nafs: Nafs l'ammaraah (نفس لأماراة) - the soul that seeks to gratify passions and do evil, see Qur'an 12:53, Nafs Lawammah (نفس لوامة) - the soul that knows right from wrong, see Qur'an 75:2, and Nafs Mutmainnah (نفس مطمئنة) - the soul which arrives at the ultimate peace, see Qur'an 89:27.¹¹

It is interesting to note that many ideas used in psychology in the west today have an origin with Islamic scholars. Haque writes, "In the area of psychology, we also find that it was the early Muslim scholars who originated many psychological theories and practices prevalent today."¹² For example, one of the earliest works on dreams is that of Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Sireen

(محمد ابن سرين 654–728), whose perspective on analysis is quite different from the western approach, which is now based on Freud and his ideas of sexual and aggressive interpretations.¹³ Al-Ghazzali taught that man was between the animals and the angels. With the acquisition of knowledge, man could rise above the angels, but could fall to the level of the animals if passions, anger and lusts are allowed to rule. He taught that Tazkiyat an-Nafs (تركية النفس) - purifying one's soul - is incumbent upon everyone, is the result of one's own good self-conduct, and is possible without destroying all of one's natural tendencies,¹⁴ which in the west would be called self-help.

The problem with the approach to human well-being in the confused western secular-Christian society is that it has placed the person's spiritual and theistic nature into a separate category known as "religion," to be pursued or ignored as desired. As Haque explains, "This process of secularization grossly neglected the moral and spiritual phenomena within man and left it up to the individual to practice religion." This, in a sense, puts western psychology in direct conflict with man's innate spiritual nature, and of course, the Islamic theory of human nature which recognizes this inherent spirituality and human free will. Identifying this clash with Islam, Haque asserts, "Modern psychology makes grave assumptions that human behaviors are observable by the senses and therefore subject to quantification and measurement, while ignoring the transcendental aspect in man."¹⁵

The western secularists often ask the question of why is there a need for a "theological structure," religion in other words, if humans are, at least theoretically capable of deducing right from wrong and the existence of the Creative Force. In response, Al-Ghazzali informs us that since humans are ruled by unlimited appetites, seeking the increase of material wealth and satisfaction of carnal desires, reason has been created to restrain them and the Shari'a, or Islamic law, has been sent by means of the Prophets (a.s.) to clarify reason.¹⁶

The west, in contrast to Islam, believes that by unleashing all of these self-serving appetites (and not passing moral judgment upon them) in the so-called free market, the maximum level of happiness for everyone will be achieved.¹⁷ As humans have freedom of choice, Islam maintains that without the Divine guidance revealed to us through Allah's Prophets and Imams (a.s.), there is no guarantee an individual would make the wisest choices for ultimate happiness and success in this world much less the next, which the secular west denies.

Sharply incompatible with Islam, modern western ontology denies the hereafter while its epistemology denies knowledge acquired through revelation. These irreconcilable differences in epistemology and ontology lie at the heart of the continual clash between Islam and the west.

Endnotes

¹ Al-Ghazzali, *On Knowing This World and the Hereafter*, trans. Muhammad Nur Abdus Salam (Chicago, Kazi Publications, 2002), 43.

² Naail Mohammed Kamil, "Ontology and Epistemology in Management Research: An Islamic Perspective," *Postmodern Openings* 7 (2011): 68-69.

³ Naail Mohammed Kamil, *ibid.*, 70-71.

⁴ "Epistemology the real difference between West and Islam," *Daily Times*, April 25, 2013, accessed November 6, 2013, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2013%5C04%5C25%5Cstory_25-4-2013_pg12_9.

⁵ Yadollah Dadgar, "The Interrelationship between Islamic Epistemological Considerations and Resolution of Actual Economic Problems," *Institute of Economic Research*, Tarbiat Modares University, January 2010, 33-34, accessed November 5, 2013, <http://www.ukm.my/hadhari/sites/default/files/prosiding/p2.pdf>.

⁶ Amber Haque, "Psychology from Islamic Perspective: Contributions of Early Muslim Scholars and challenges to Contemporary Muslim Psychologists," *Journal of Religion and Health*, 43-4 (2004): 359.

⁷ Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 112, 114.

⁸ Debra L. Black, "Al-Farabi," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Qom: Ansariyan, 2008) 192.

⁹ Debra L. Black, *ibid.*, 179.

¹⁰ Massimo Campanini, "Al-Ghazzali," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Qom: Ansariyan, 2008), 259, 264.

¹¹ Amber Haque, *ibid.*, 367-368

¹² Amber Haque, *ibid.*, 360.

¹³ Amber Haque, *ibid.*, 375.

¹⁴ Amber Haque, *ibid.*, 368.

¹⁵ Amber Haque, *ibid.*, 372-373.

¹⁶ Al-Ghazzali, *ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷ John Kenneth Galbraith, *Economics & The Public Purpose* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 12.