



Analysis of Knowledge: The Epistemic Theories in View of Avicenna and Mullā Sadrā

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the epistemological approach conveyed from Avicenna's philosophy to Sadrā's transcendent theosophy. As elucidating epistemological framework in each theory helps us to clarify dark angles of that theory, this paper focuses on the epistemological approach conveyed from Avicenna's philosophy to Sadrā's transcendent theosophy. Under the influence of Avicenna's and Mullā Sadrā's different ontological approaches, i.e., essentialism and existentialism, their epistemic theories are transformed from the theory of abstraction into the unity of the known-object and the knower-subject. The required data for this study have been collected mainly through library research from secondary and primary sources. Library research is a method by means this research focuses on relevant sources in three languages: original works such as books, data bases, theses and articles which are mostly in Arabic and some are in English and Persian. The two scholars relying on a common base stone, realism, present two different theories to interpret the relationship between the human mind and the external world. As the border between the mind and external world determines the degree of realism in each theory, the paper examines their epistemic theories, which explain the relationship between the mind as the knower-subject and the external world as the known object. However, as their epistemology and ontology are two sides of a coin, such research is bound to fail without considering this cohesion. Hence, the present article is to focus on two fundamental issues as the problem statements of research: first, how their ontologies influence their epistemological theories, and, second, what weak and strong points imply the limitations of the two thinkers' realistic attitudes.

Keywords: *Avicenna, Mullā Sadrā, abstraction, unity of known and knower, essentialism, existentialism*

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INTRODUCTION

Both Avicenna and Mullā Sadrā, who are in order the pioneers of Peripatetic school and Transcendent theosophy, are known as realist philosophers in the Medieval Age. As their epistemology and ontological theories have interactional points, their realistic attitude based on a kind of impenetrable certainty can be elucidated just by considering the relationship between their ontological and epistemic theories. Although epistemological issues were not considered as an independent discipline beside other branches of knowledge by Muslim philosophers, through a comparative research, we can trace a continuous process of epistemic theories conveyed from Avicenna to Mullā Sadrā. This thought progress is, first, firmly influenced by their theological ontology (Kharabi Masouleh, 2020) and, second, greatly tends to present a realistic outline of the universe.

The epistemic theories in Islamic Peripatetic philosophy which originates from Aristotelian metaphysical system

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(Wisnovsky, 2005) have been influenced by various interpretations, explanations, critics, translation into Latin and friction or adaption with other schools of thought such as illuminative doctrines and dialectical theologians. Dividing Aristotle's logic into two main parts as definition and reasoning by Al-Farabi (Bakar, 2006) to some extent determines the role of sense and reason for his followers so far as epistemology is concerned. Among Muslim thinkers such as Al-Farabi and Avicenna sense perception is the basic principle of definition (Marmura, 2005), a method elaborated on by the master of the Peripatetics Aristotle, and also criticized by others because of its limited scope. By proposing a systematic interaction between sense perception and intellect that provides us with abstracting the universals from particular sensibles, Avicenna steps into a concomitance between empiricism and rationalism. In this framework, Avicenna, in his abstraction theory (D'Ancona, 2008) draws a hierarchy of interaction between sense and mind according to which the more abstract our knowledge is from particular matter and material accidents, more decreases the role of sensation; it continues until sense perceptions lose their function in the intelligibles. An ontological division holding a distinction between external and mental existence is a fundamental structure of this theory. This explanation is, too, based on the correspondence theory claiming that our knowledge represents the external correspondent of the concepts. The state of being connected through sense perceptions to the sensibles in the external world provides us with their mental forms which mirror what are in the outer world. That is, the mental forms of objects as a link bridge the gap between the knower-subject and the known-object.

As determining principles which form the structure of Mullā Sadrā's ontology, the theories of the primacy of existence (al Din Shirazi, 1981), unity of being (wahdat al-wujud), ambiguity of existence (tashkik al-wujud) (Ibid), and substantial motion (al-arakat al-jawhariyyah), picture another outline of his epistemology in which instead of connection we see a kind of unity between the known-object and the knower-subject. The change from juncture (Ittisal), (Yaldir, 2009) in Avicenna's epistemology, into unity (Ittiad), in Mullā Sadrā's epistemic thoughts, relates to fundamental difference in their ontology (Nasr, 1989).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The article, through conceptual analysis method, tries to show: first, how their epistemological theories are influenced by their ontologies, and, second, what weak and strong points imply the limitations of the two philosophers' realism. The required data for this study have been collected mainly through library research from secondary and primary sources. Library research is a method by means this research focuses on relevant sources in three languages: original works such as books, data bases, theses and articles which are mostly in Arabic and some are in English and Persian.

Avicenna's essentialism and Sadrā's special existentialism constitute the distinction between their epistemic theories. In Avicenna's ontology, under influence of the ten predicaments of Aristotelian categorization, we see an essentialism which explains the correspondence theory. However, in Sadrā's ontology a kind of existentialism based on the primacy of existence interprets all aspects of his epistemology such as the unity of the known and the knower.

To examine strong and weak points of their epistemologies, we have to argue whether their epistemic theories open the door to the objection that we can never know that our knowledge is an accurate representation of the external world. If their justifications fail to overcome this objection, we might encounter a kind of skepticism or at least solipsism holding a fundamental difference between our knowledge of things and the things themselves, a conclusion, which is against their realism. Knowledge in View of Avicenna

Avicenna, a medieval, peripatetic philosopher, is a classic example of realist, that is, he believes there is a realm of reality that its existence does not depend on the beholder of reality. In his epistemology, we encounter a triadic relationship between the knower, the known object and the mental forms of the objects which as our knowledge mirror the external world. Relying on this relationship, he defines knowledge as the presence of known objects' forms to knower subject (Avicenna, 1960).

This description of knowledge indicates that Avicenna based on the correspondence theory explains the relationship between known object and knower subject. To examine weak and strong points of this theory, we have to prove that the mental forms present to mind accurately represent their objects, and really correspond to them. For the purpose, he had to provide an ontological ground compatible to establish his correspondence theory on it.

Ontologically, Avicenna holds that existence is divided into necessary being which includes just one reality which is the First Cause y, Wajibu al-wujud, and contingent entities (Mumkin al-wujud) (Ibid) which, except the First Cause, every existent has such an existence. Each contingent existent analytically consists of existence which is posited before

questioning about whether something does exist, and quiddity which refers to the description of its essence (Avicenna, 1965). The relationship of essence to existence and nonexistence is equal. That is, if the contingent fact is actualized by the bestower of existence, its essence could be existent, or else could not exist. The notion of contingency in Avicenna's philosophy originates from this explanation. Quiddity or whatness of an entity that refers to the essence of things necessarily appears either with external existence or with mental existence as conceptions in our mind.

The actualization of forms of objectives in mind occurs through a process of different degrees of abstract from particular sensible forms to intelligible forms which are universal and are apprehended by human intellect. Therefore, this philosopher classifies human knowledge in particular forms and universal conceptions. The process of conceptual abstract in Avicenna's epistemology occurs through a complicated mutual interaction between the sense and human intellect that we cannot decisively know Avicenna a rationalist or empiricist philosopher. Of course, in the history of philosophy empiricism and rationalism are considered as Western classification of philosophical attitudes. According to Western modern schools, reliance on either sense or reason as instruments of cognition, philosophies are divided mainly to two groups of empiricist and rationalist philosophy. The intimate relationship between sense and intellect in Avicenna's philosophy directs us to conclude that his attitude in epistemology is probably a kind of empirical-rational approach rather than absolutely empiricism or rationalism. The theory of abstraction in graduated degrees explains the interaction between sense organs in perceiving particular sensibles and human intellect in abstracting conceptions and generalizing them.

In Avicenna's view, the human mind in the beginning of life is empty of any kind of thought, and in the other word, it is in the state of potentiality. Here, he puts forward Aristotelian theory of potency to claim that there is a kind of passive and active relationship between the human mind and external objects. Gradually Sensory organs establish a direct contact with the material world. Each of the sense organs is influenced by a specific sensible material objective, and perceives its form by depending on its special capacity. The philosopher develops his theory by suggesting five different internal senses which include: common sense, retentive imagination, cogitative imagination (Black, 2013), estimative faculty and finally the faculty of memory (Avicenna, n.d.). The faculties of sensation such as sight, hearing, touch and others continually provide the forms of sensibles to the common sense. The mental forms are comprehended in common sense with presence of external objects. In a higher degree of abstraction, the retentive faculty protects the forms of external sensibles with their material accidents such as shape, color, location, quantity without the presence of external objects. It occurs whenever the connection of sense with the external world is completely removed like the time when we close our eyes after seeing a portrait, we imagine it. The sensory images abstracted from external objects are dis-joined and combined with one another to create new forms in the faculty of cogitative. The faculty of estimation provides the apprehension of intentions or incorporeal meanings of particular empirical entities not only in the absence of external objects, but in lack of all material accidents like shape, location or quantity. The task of memory is to protect and retain the incorporeal meanings.

The remarkable point is that although the five internal sense faculties deal with sensible, particular concretely existents, their mental forms in mind become abstracted from external material properties by human intellect in different degrees. To the extent that the images provided by sensory organs are abstracted from material properties such as time, space, shape and others, their relationship to the external world decreases, and they are raised to a higher position of existence, incorporeal realities known as intelligible, and are apprehended just by human intellect. In the ultimate abstraction, human intellect not only merely comprehends the general concept of essence known as natural universal, but also disregards their existence. In this rank of abstraction, sense perception as a material factor in the process of cognition loses its function because rational soul or human intellect, which itself is an incorporeal substance, is the substratum of incorporeal intelligible forms. Universal concepts such as humanity as an essence of a species are apprehended just by the rational soul while the particular sensible forms of external individuals of that species are perceived through the external and internal sense faculties. Therefore, according to Avicenna, particular sensible forms of concrete objects as sense perceptions, and intelligible forms with the highest level of abstraction represent the external world to us. Such an epistemic explanation from Avicenna is influenced by an essential-ism comes from the Aristotelian ontological framework. The extent of our mental forms from the essence of different species, and the degree of their abstract are the criteria of our knowledge, and their correspondence with their external objects guarantees the validity of human knowledge.

KNOWLEDGE IN VIEW OF MULLĀ SADRĀ

Against Avicenna's essentialism, Mullā Sadrā propounds a deconstructive approach of which foundation is a special kind of existentialism, and consequently we see its profound restructuring in his epistemology. Although realism is the most significant common belief of the two thinkers, they have essentially different approaches to the issue that necessarily leads to divergent epistemic theories. In Avicenna's view, existence constitutes the reality because it is opposite to non-existence, but it is the accident to quiddity (Avicenna, n.d.). According to Mullā Sadrā's doctrine, however, the essence or quiddity of an existent is nothing, but the limitation of its existence which is apprehended by human intellect. Here, unlike Avicennian essentialism, the essence of an entity such as humanity has a negative description which determines the confines of the existence of human. Based on such ontology, Mullā Sadrā puts forward a kind of epistemology which differs fundamentally from what we see in Avicenna's thoughts. In fact, his epistemic theory is established on the ever-expanding notion of existence. That is, there is nothing but existence and the extent of our existence as human perfection determines the range of our knowledge. The definition of knowledge changes from the presence of the mental forms of the external known-object to knower-subject into the presence of the known-object to the knower-subject which Mullā Sadrā interprets it as a mode of existence (Mulla Sadra, 2002, 1984b, 1984a).

The Relationship Between the Known Object and the Knower Subject According to Mullā Sadrā

The notion of presence is meant a kind of unity which explains the theory of unity between the known-object and the knower-subject (Sadrā, *Talqe bar Hikmat Al-Ishraq*) in this doctrine. Logically, owing to the fact that known and the knower are understood as two facts, differentiation between them is necessary, and on the other hand, the unity of known and knower, emphasized in Sadrā's doctrine, requires a kind of identity between them. Based on the theories of unity and ambiguity of being, as two ontological principles in Sadrā's theosophy, we see comprehensiveness for the reality of existence according to which the meanings of identity and differentiation of two facts are changed into multiplicity in unity and unity in multiplicity. Under such a comprehensive and hierarchical notion of existence, the place of and the relationship between the known-object and the knower-subject is explained as a kind of unity between them. The existence of knower in a higher rank of being comprehends the existence of known object which is actualized in a lower level of existential system.

Based on the theory of substantial motion, (al Din Shirazi, 1981; Mulla Sadra, 2003), saying the reality of knowledge is a gradual trend from potentiality to actuality; he completes the process of knowledge in his system. This theory provides us with a dynamical picture of the whole universe that relying on it, he explicates the evolution of the Universe from existential deficiency to perfection in existence. Acquisition of knowledge, as the perfection of the human soul, is an example in which the human being transcends in hierarchical order of the Universe. In other words, knowledge is a kind of transcendency in the existence of the human soul in which the existence of the knower-subject is united with the existence of the known-object so that the former comprehends the latter through presential knowledge according to which no mediation could be assumed between them. The main question is if we can delineate correspondence theory in such a relationship between known and knower.

Challenges to Epistemic Foundations of Avicenna and Mullā Sadrā's Realism

Questioning about proving truth which is a controversial issue among most philosophical doctrines can examine the weak and strong points of the Avicenna's and Mullā Sadrā's epistemological foundations. Based on what is mentioned above, the two thinkers' main engagement is to offer a kind of epistemology which, unlike skepticism, is to be able to prove the real world whose existence is independent of our consciousness, i.e., defining knowledge in a manner which represents their objects and corresponds to them. Probably, the most similar theory to Avicenna's explanation for knowledge is the correspondence theory, which asserts that truth is nothing but an agreement or correspondence between a proposition and some fact in the real world. Some other theories of truth, such as coherence and pragmatic theories (Ibid) have been propounded that are fundamentally different from his views. The structure of the correspondence theory is the relations of beliefs to external facts, not any internal quality of beliefs (Russell, 1912). This theory sounds problematic when we seek whether it is possible to prove that our knowledge correspond to its objects in the external world. In other words, we definitely know that our knowledge represents some facts and relationships in the world, yet how it is possible to demonstrate that there is a real correspondence between our knowledge and the facts which is external to ourselves. It would be clarified if we distinguish the difference between the meanings of representation

and correspondence. The representative function of knowledge refers to a kind of internal consciousness which is intuitively evident for the knower-subject. In spite of this evidence, the correspondence of knowledge to the reality indicates a special relationship between the knowledge and its objects in the external world. However, we have no way to prove that this correspondence is accurate because we cannot get beyond our knowledge playing the role of mediation to check the external world. Avicenna is of the view that intelligibles which are natural universals of the facts, and constitute a large part of our acquired knowledge, are the representative mediation between the knower-subject and the known-objects. Although the representative state of intelligibles is intuitively evident to the knower, their correspondence to the real facts is suffering from the same uncertainty which could be discussed in the correspondence theory.

In Mullā Sadrā's doctrine, however, correspondence theory is eliminated under the comprehensive notion of existence because the relationship between the knowledge and the known object is not correspondence, but a kind of unity in hierarchical order of being. It means that as the existence of knowledge and the known object is the same, they have identical reality not two separate ones. On the other hand, existential transcendence and inclusiveness of the knower subject provides a situation in which the known object is totally present to the knower and the knower in common part of existence is partially present to the known. According to this view, the multiplicity which we see in Avicenna's philosophy among the known object, the knowledge and the knower subject is integrated under the comprehensive and hierarchical notion of existence.

LIMITATIONS AND POTENTIAL RESEARCHES

Conducting such a research could help to reconsider the epistemic foundations in doctrines of which Avicenna and Mullā Sadrā are prominent pioneers, Islamic Peripatetic philosophy and Transcendent theosophy. As epistemology was not considered as an independent branch of study among Muslim thinkers, the significant limitation in the study of their epistemic theories is lack of sources focusing on theories of knowledge. So the researcher really ought to extract their epistemic theories from their different works.

CONCLUSION

First of all, the transformation of ontology from essentialism to existentialism is the inflection point of difference in Avicenna's and Mullā Sadrā's epistemologies. Avicenna's theory of abstraction explicates natural universals as intelligible forms, which bridge the gap between human intellect and the external world. Based on this theory, different degrees of being abstracted from matter and material accidents are an influential process in the representation of knowledge. In the ultimate rank of abstraction, some essence like humanity per se is apprehended as intelligible form by human intellect. Avicenna proposes the initial role of internal sense faculties to explain this procedure. In Mullā Sadrā's doctrine, however, the multiplicity among the known-object, the knower-subject and knowledge is integrated under the comprehensive notion of existence. Secondly, in Avicenna's explanation we face objections to the justification of correspondence between knowledge and the external world. On the contrary, such an objection sounds pointless in Mullā Sadrā's epistemology which presents a kind of existential unity between the known-object and the knower-subject in conformity with his hierarchical system of existence. Based on such an explanation, the existential unity assumed between the known and the knower provides no place to question about correspondence since there is a graded reality, existence, with univocal meaning in which the existence of the known is totally present to the knower, and that of the knower is partially present to the known in their common part.

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