



Degrees of Divine Knowledge According to Prophetic Traditions

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Abstract: *Divine knowledge is one of the most complicated and disputed issues in the domain of theology and philosophy and its investigation is of particular importance by Islamic philosophers and theologians. Prophetic traditions suggest that God is of an essential knowledge that is absolute and unique and no one can have access to the Lord's deep essence as well as his absolute knowledge. God's comprehensive knowledge of everything, non-hierarchicality of divine essential knowledge, contradiction between God and His creatures and non-unity of the Knower and the known are among the characteristics of divine essential knowledge. Traditions of Holy Imams (peace be upon them) do also prove another knowledge for God. According to these traditions, beside His Essential Knowledge God has another knowledge called Actional Knowledge that refers indeed to Divine Action. Hierarchicality is one of the basic features of Divine Actional Knowledge. Actional knowledge of God is of heptafold levels. Every realized phenomenon is one of the heptafold levels of Divine Action and Knowledge. Providence as the first and most important level of Divine Knowledge and Action has an important role in the creation of creatures by God.*

Keywords: *Divine Knowledge, Essential Knowledge, Actional Knowledge, Providence*

INTRODUCTION

Divine Knowledge is one of the most important issues that has been continuously discussed by Islamic theologians and philosophers and the debate of it has always been among the chief and basic concerns of them.

In Holy Quran Divine Knowledge has been reminded almost 250 times and in Prophetic Traditions numerous points have been mentioned regarding Divine Knowledge. In Quran and traditions, the creation of creations in the universe and their cohesion and divine omnipotence have been declared as the signs and evidences of Absolute Divine Knowledge.

According to the traditions of Holy Imams (peace be upon them), God is of two types of knowledge: Essential Knowledge and Actional Knowledge. Divine Knowledge is featured as absolute and infinite. Moreover, according to the traditions that have been related from Holy Imams (peace be upon them), Essential Divine Knowledge represents God's comprehensive epistemic domination over everything including universals and particulars, such issues as the denial of hierarchy, difference between God and His creatures, lack of unity between the Knower and the Known are raised. Prophetic traditions suggest that God does also have another knowledge beside His Essential Knowledge that is called Actional Knowledge that is not absolute like Divine Essential Knowledge rather it is limited and finite and is of certain hierarchies. Thus, whatever happens on the behalf of God is one of the heptafold levels of Divine Actional Knowledge among which Providence is the first and most important one that plays an indispensable role in the creation of creatures as the Divine

mediator. Then, prophetic traditions describe providence as the first and most vital level of Divine Knowledge and Action. Of course, the point is that prophetic traditions demonstrate the non-eternity of the levels of Divine Knowledge. In fact, traditions insist on the contingency of Divine Providence and Will. We hope to cast light on the points hidden in the words of Immaculate Imams (peace be upon them) through a detailed discussion of the dimensions of Divine Knowledge.

A) Divine Essential Knowledge according to Prophetic Traditions:

God's absolute knowledge is one of His essential attributes and for this reason Divine Knowledge is not a renewing episteme acquired through certain means rather it is absolute and infinite and God has epistemic domination (omniscience) over everything including universals and particulars. God has knowledge of the objects before they come to existence and there is no difference between God's knowledge of objects before and after their coming into existence and this knowledge is known as Divine Essential Knowledge.

There are various issues regarding God's Essential Knowledge. Divine Omniscience (God's comprehensive knowledge of everything), denial of hierarchy in God's Essential Knowledge, difference between God and His creatures and non-unity of Knower and known that will be respectively discussed hereunder.

1. Divine Omniscience:

In many prophetic traditions of Imams (peace be upon them) as well as the philosophical and theological debates various issues have been raised regarding Divine Omniscience and there is no single creature in the universe unless God has knowledge of it.

Imam Ali (peace be upon him) in his prayer known as Kumayl states: And by Your knowledge, which encompasses all things; every secret is known to you. Every hidden is uncovered by you – you are informed of whatever kept in silence and to the secrets of traitors. He knows everything embroiled in complicacies and seem covered.

Imam also notes that divine knowledge is not acquired from other and no transformation and reclaiming occurs in it. God's knowledge is eternal and perfect and is free from every type of defect (Imam Ali, Sermon 108, 109).

2. Denial of Hierarchy in Divine Essential Knowledge:

Divine Essential Knowledge is an exclusive attribute of God's essence and for this reason no hierarchy or gradation can be deemed regarding it and prophetic traditions endorse this fact. No single allusion has been made to divine knowledge before and after creation. For example, Imam Reza (peace be upon him) states: "God is always knowledgeable of objects even before He has created them and His knowledge to them is like His knowledge after their creation" (Ibn Babuyah, 1978).

In a tradition quoted from Imam Sadeq (peace be upon him) on Divine Knowledge Imam is asked: "Is God knowledgeable of space before its creation or He becomes knowledgeable when He creates it?" Imam answers: "God is supreme and nobler rather He is knowledgeable of space before its creation and no change happens in His essence before and after the creation" (Ibn Babuyah, 1978).

As regards this Imam Ali has also stated: "God had objects in His knowledge before their existence then nothing was added to His knowledge after their creation and His knowledge remained the same before and after the creation" (Majlesi, 1984).

3. God/Creatures Difference

In a tradition quoted from Imam Reza in which Imam refers to the difference and separation of creatures and God he states: "God's essence is His very truth and the nature of this essence is His separation from the creatures" (Ibn Babuyah, 1978).

Moreover, Imam Ali offers a fresh account of God's knowledge of objects: God has made everything limited upon their creation in order to distinguish them from His Own Divine Essence. He is not immanent in objects so that one may say that He was in the objects and then distanced rather Divine Consciousness embraces everything and His construction constitutes objects and enumerates them (Ibn Babuyah, 1978). Indeed, God's knowledge in this context refers to one's awareness of his Attributes of Majesty and Beauty, i.e. knowing Divine Negative and Affirmative Attributes as far as human capacity allows. However, no human individual has the ability to understand Divine Innermost Essence or even His Attributes. These are unknown to the angels and prophets let alone to the defected minds.

It needs to be noted that the difference between God and creatures here does not refer to a spatial difference in the sense that God is not in a place where creatures are. It also does not imply that God lies outside an existential level rather He has coexistence and presence with every object while He is transcendent in Essence and Attributes as compared to creatures. This quality has been described as attributive difference that is contrasted with deposing difference: "God's reason is His signs and His existence is the only unique argument on existence and His knowledge is monotheism that in turn implies separating God from the creatures and separation in this context means distinction in attributes not spatial and temporal separation"¹ (Tabarsi, 1983).

As to God's Essential Knowledge it should be said that there are numerous traditions among which we mentioned a number of them. In fact, one can state that Divine Knowledge in absolute and unique form is Eternal Essential Knowledge which is by no means separated from God. We humans do not have access to the innermost nature of Divine Essence and remain wondered at it.

The word "Allah" is also said to be a derivative of "Walah" [Wonder]. In a prophetic tradition Imam (peace be upon him) has been quoted to have said: Lord is the one at whom the creatures become wondered in the moments of hardship and need. In other tradition we read: "Allah refers to a Lord the creatures of whom are all enchanted and He is hidden from the eyes" (Maleki Myanji, 1984).

4. Disunity of Knower and the Known:

God as the Knower does not have any unity with the creatures that are His known because God is infinitely evident in His Essence while the creatures are dark and unknown and are enlightened by the knowledge whose light is casted on them. Then a dark object cannot be united with an essentially luminous thing. In other words, one can state that all creatures are darkness as compared to Divine Essence who is the Unique Absolute Light. As a result, darkness cannot approach light. For this reason, the supposition of any form of association between the existence of the known and Divine Essence either in the form of unity or other is impossible (Maleki Mianji, 1985; Rahimian, 2006).

Moreover, this is in contrast with the ideology of the Prophet's Household and in their words the emphasis has been laid on the separation of the Transcendent and His creatures. Imam Ali (peace be upon him) in a sermon where he describes the unity of God has also referred to the separation between the Creator and the creature. He states: anyone who conceives a limit for Him he surely does not believe in Divine Uniqueness; anyone who deems a fellow for Him

¹Attributive difference refers to the difference between God's attributes and His creatures. This is not to say that they are totally different and separated from each other rather it means that we should not confuse their attributes. Deposing difference denotes the total difference of God and the creatures. These two types of differences are often confused. Deposing difference is underlined in prophetic traditions (Brenjkar and Yathrebi, 2006, p. 281).

he does not believe Him; anyone who likens Him to a creature he has not known His Truth; anyone who want to know his innermost nature he has not affirmed His uniqueness; anyone who deems a beginning and an end for Him he does not believe in Him. God can be known by His creatures and we can believe in Him and know Him by our intellectual power. He created the world and hung a veil between Divinity and the created. His separation and contrast is the reason for Creator/creature difference. The beginning of creation is an indication of the fact that there is no beginning for Him (Imam Ali, Sermon 1).

B) Actional Knowledge:

Beside Essential Knowledge God has another knowledge known as Divine Actional Knowledge, which refer to the body of knowledge that is registered on a tableau. This knowledge, against Divine Knowledge, is limited and renewable and can be hierarchical.

Divine Actional Knowledge is a knowledge that has been endowed upon the prophets and angels by God. As Imam Ali has noted in the sermon 128 of Nahjulbalaghah, divine knowledge is of two types. One is invisible knowledge that represents the essential knowledge while the other is the knowledge that has been taught to the prophets by God. In this sermon Imam refers to this knowledge as acquired invisible knowledge. Imam states that after God taught this knowledge to the Prophet he prayed for me that may God fill my chest and body members with such knowledge. Of course, in a number of traditions Divine Actional Knowledge has been referred to as the Bestowed Knowledge and it is stated that whatever God creates and emanates is from this epistemic point. 'Arsh, Kursi, um al-Kitab, Mahw and Ethbat are among Divine Actional Knowledge.

1. Levels of Divine Knowledge and Action according to Prophetic Traditions:

As previously mentioned, Divine Essential Knowledge is impossible to be hierarchical because it is absolute and exclusively belongs to God and no one has the access to Divine Knowledge and Essence. But God has another knowledge, i.e. Actional Divine Knowledge that is of hierarchy. In fact, Divine Actional Knowledge is of heptafold levels that exist in the outside world. These heptafold levels are known also as Seven Characteristics. These levels are respectively as follows: providence, will, decree, karma, permission, book and fate. Various traditions endorse this fact, e.g. Imam Sadeq (peace be upon him) is quoted to have said that nothing has been created in the heavens and earth unless it has seven characteristics: providence, decree, karma, permission, book and fate. Then anyone who thinks that he can breach one of them he is decidedly infidel (Kuleini, 1983).

The levels of Divine Knowledge and Action have been articulated in detailed fashion in some prophetic traditions:

A man asked Imam Kazem (peace be upon him) that how is the Divine Knowledge? Imam stated: he knew, decided, willed, measured, decreed and then implemented. He implemented what he decreed; he decreed what he measured; he measured what he willed; then he decided upon his knowledge and this decision served as his will and thus the universe emerged upon his decree and it was the fate decided by him that was implemented and knowledge came before his decision and it was followed by providence and in the third place the fate and karma take place with divine ratification. Then, before ratification is an emergence from the darkness (ex nihilo) for God and when an occurrence takes place there is no longer any ex nihilo rather knowledge concerns the known before its coming into existence and providence existence before its external coming into being and the known and its fate exists before its extension in time and space and the providence that happens with ratification are the grounded objects that have been embodied and can be perceived by senses like colored objects and measurable things and living things and others such humans, birds and goblets and whatever that can be perceived by senses. The until the time that they have not come to

existence in the outside world we can deem “ex nihilo” for God and when they become externally perceivable there is no longer any “ex nihilo” and God can do whatever he wants and know the creatures with his knowledge before their existence. It is with his providence that God can know the objects before their coming into being. It was with his will that God distinguished between colors and features of objects; it was with fate that God decided the days and knows their beginning and end. With his karma he determined their places clearly and explained their causes and state (Ibn Babuyah, 1978).

This tradition suggests that Divine Knowledge of objects makes them objectified in the outside world. This is indeed God’s Actional Knowledge. In other words, Divine Actional Knowledge is the very realization of the external objects in the outside world and there is no duality between them. The reason for this is that Divine Essential Knowledge does not have any before and after.

However, when it is said that Divine Knowledge in creation of creatures is in two undetailed and detailed form this knowledge is indeed no knowledge rather it is one of the human perceptions that is called spiritual perception and if we take for granted the spiritual perception as regards God we have indeed likened divine knowledge to human knowledge of objects and this is impossible (Qazi Saeed Qomi, 1985).

2. Role of Providence as the First and Most Important Level of Divine Knowledge:

As we mentioned earlier after God’s knowledge of objects providence does have the first and most fundamental role in the divine action of creation. This is why prophetic traditions introduce providence as the first level of Divine Knowledge and Action. As Imam Sadeq (peace be upon him) has stated in a tradition: God created providence and the objects came to existence via providence (Ibn Babuyah, 1978).

According to the aforementioned tradition, providence as the first level of Divine Knowledge and Action and in view of its mediating role in creation is of paramount significance because God’s action in the outside world has its origin in knowledge and after the latter providence comes and upon its emergence knowledge finds a counterpart as before it knowledge is just absolute. In other words, providence determines the attributes and limits of objects.

According to the previously quoted tradition, God existed from the eternity and His power is also eternal and accompanied Him. However, divine knowledge and power are equal and need something to give them preference and determination and this thing is Divine Providence. Providence parallels divine knowledge and power because in the epistemic level the existence and non-existence of an object is equal and when God issues a verdict one is preferred over the other and verdict here is the same providence (Isfahani, manuscript, p. 45).

In another tradition that relates a dialogue between Imam Reza and a person Imam refers to providence as the starting point (Majlesi, 1984, vol. 5, p. 122).

As we saw, role of providence as a mediator in the creation by God is undeniable. Then, when one asks the Prince of Believers Imam Ali (peace be upon him) as regards the reason of the fact that phenomena never refuse to follow God’s order, Imam states that nothing would ever refuse to follow Divine Order because everything obeys the Lord based on Divine Providence. The reason for this is that every effect obeys its cause and all phenomena are the effects of God in causal hierarchy and this truth has been demonstrated in the discussion of Divine Knowledge (Imam Ali, Sermon 91; Majlesi, nd., vol. 74, p. 321; Ibn Babuyah, 1978).

Non-eternity of Providence and Will:

In prophetic traditions various reasons have been offered to demonstrate the fact that the attributes of Divine Action are not eternal. Even in some traditions the eternity of the attributes of Divine Action has been

declared to be tantamount to apostasy. Thus Divine Knowledge as an Essential Attribute is eternal while the attributes of action are contingent. Divine Actional Attributes are so that they occur when the action occurs. Imam Sadeq (peace be upon him) in his response to the question that if God has been always willing stated: “there is no willer unless for a willed along with it. God has always been knower and after it he has willed” (Ibn Babuyah, 1978).

This is also underlined in another tradition where Imam Sadeq is quoted to have said that: “God was knowing and powerful before willing something” and “providence is contingent” (Ibn Babuyah, 1978).

These two traditions remind us that will and providence are not eternal. Then anyone who considers them eternal and inseparable from God is infidel and apostate. If we suppose that God is always willing and has providence, we have certainly divested him of volition because continuous will denotes that God does not have power to leave willing. This tradition demonstrates the eternity of Divine Knowledge. However, the reason that denies the eternity of will is the fact that will should be always concerned with an object and this means that it should be in need of that object and this is in fact beyond the definition of divinity.

Indeed, contingency of providence and will are among the rules of the path of Prophet’s Household rather among their necessities in the sense that the willed always comes to existence in association with the willer and this association is temporal and this is why will is other than hearing and vision and other divine attributes. Then providence and will are contingent (Qazi Saeed Qomi, 1976).

Imam Reza (peace be upon him) has highlighted the non-eternity of providence and will as follows: “Providence and will are among the Actional Attributes. Then, whoever supposes that Exalted God is always willing and having providence he is not a monotheist”. The apostasy implicit in this belief is that if one supposes that will and providence are eternal he unavoidably believes that the willed and the object of providence are also eternal while effectuality is impossible in the eternal and there is a need for a second God because will and providence will be with God. Then one can conclude that God has been Knowing and Capable from the eternity and then he has willed (Majlesi, 1974).

It needs to be mentioned that in the same way that Divine Essence is eternal this quality does not exist in Divine Action because the latter has an inception while Essence does have any beginning. Therefore, inception and eternity are not coherent from rational point of view and divine actions are non-eternal and limited. All Divine Actions including will and providence are not eternal.

Conclusion:

Considering the prophetic traditions quoted regarding Divine Knowledge and the levels of Divine Action and Knowledge one can conclude that traditions demonstrate essential knowledge for God as an Absolute Knowledge. Thus Divine All-embracing Episteme of everything, non-hierarchicality, God’s contrast with creatures, disunity of Knower and the Known are among the characteristics of Divine Essential Knowledge. The traditions quoted from Imams (peace be upon them) also attribute another type of Knowledge to God that is called Actional Knowledge. Actional Knowledge is of heptafold levels that are knowledge as Seven Characteristics. Whatever created by God is originated from Divine Actional Knowledge and its heptafold levels. The point is that against Divine Essential Knowledge that is eternal, Divine Actional Knowledge and its levels are not eternal and since they are finite then they are surely contingent. The role of providence as the first level of Divine Knowledge and Action is by no means deniable because providence plays an important role as mediator of creation of creatures by God that is endorsed by the prophetic traditions.

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