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The Theory of Knowledge in Western and Eastern Philosophy: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: Recognizing the problem of knowledge and how it has always been and always for philosophers of East and West on the basis of their intellectual each have to explain it. The importance of knowledge to the discussion is that it exists as one of the central issues in the philosophy known. This article has attempted to pass first, a brief descriptive analysis of the most important philosophers of views on knowledge of the West and the Muslim philosophers have, then the design similarities and differences in their views. The result is that Muslim philosophers felt alone cannot be the basis of all knowledge and perceptions; Science there cannot be examined without taking into account the fact that some of the factors causing the development of human existence, The prevailing view among philosophers is that the West is subject to (ego) the objects of knowledge and identity.

Key words: being, East philosophers, knowledge, subject ,West philosophers.

Introduction:

This essay has tried to compare the theory of knowledge in western and Islamic philosophy. Needless to say, only the points of similarities will be discussed rather than a detailed comparison of the two philosophies.

A working definition of knowledge is that knowledge is the result of the encounter between the subject (observer) and being, i.e. knowledge is the product of the perceiver's perception.

The issue of knowledge has a long history in Islamic philosophy. It is discussed in relation to many ideas such as cognition, perception, reason, rationality, subjectivity, substance and properties. The theory of knowledge epitomizes in Mulla Sadra's metaphysics of being in which he refers to knowledge and its effect as the following: knowledge is the driving energy behind material and spiritual realization. The source of this energy is located at the depth of one's being and it is only through the use of this source that a human being is able to transgress the boundaries and create a situation for its being; in fact, knowledge is the relation between the mind and the external world.

The modern western philosophy discusses the theory of knowledge in terms of an opposition between ontology and epistemology. It is worth mentioning that epistemology has come to have a better share in recent philosophies.

To put it succinctly, some of the questions that this essays deals with are: first, how have western and eastern philosophers thought about knowledge and its effect? Second, what are the similarities and differences between them?

Discussion:

The possibility of knowledge: Some agnostic and skeptic philosophers have argued that knowledge is impossible ipso facto. However, in contrast to these philosophers, most others believe that knowledge is possible.

The Holy Quran invites people to gain knowledge by constantly reminding them that, "Why is it that you are not thinking?" or "Have you stopped thinking?" Therefore, knowledge is not only possible but is also necessary.

Tools of knowledge: the five senses, the faculty of mind, the faculty of intuition (self-purgation)

Degrees of knowledge: superficial and in-depth. The latter is itself divided into superficial (simple), scientific and philosophical.

Sources of knowledge: nature, reason, intuition and history

Stages of knowledge: for the mystics, knowledge has a special stage, that is, a mystic journey (intuition). However, for the philosophers, knowledge has three stages, i.e. impression, imagination and reason. It is worth mentioning that Mulla Sadra considers speculation as a stage of knowledge too.

According to Hegel and Kant, knowledge has two stages: scientific and philosophical. For Herbert Spencer, knowledge has three stages, namely, impression, science and philosophy. The proponents of dialectical materialism note that knowledge has three stages, namely, impression, reason and action. The theory of one-stage of knowledge, that is, either reason or impression as the only stage, does not have many supporters in philosophical circles (Motahari, 2014).

The theory of knowledge in Islam can be traced back to the first century (A.D) when it was discussed in the form of questions and debates among the Shiite Imams especially Imam Sadeq (PBUH). From the perspective of Islam, there are two types of knowledge:

1. Essential
2. Inessential (or acquired)

Essential knowledge includes intuition, reason and impression. Intuition itself has three kinds:

- a) Temptation which is done by the devil.
- b) Inspiration, from the God to the non-prophets.
- c) Revelation, from the God to the prophets.

Knowledge based on reason is something axiomatic. It includes such processes as analysis, induction, deduction, abstraction and generalization.

Knowledge based on impression is limited to the instinct and the five senses.

Inessential or acquired knowledge has two characteristics: first, it acquires certain tools; second, this type of knowledge is not universal (Motahari, 1990).

A brief survey of theory of knowledge in the west:

The ancient Greece: Parmenides said that being is nothing but thinking and knowledge, i.e. unity in presential or immediate knowledge, between the knower and the known (Foruqi, 1988). There seems to be some similarities between this idea and those of Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra.

Aristotle separated knowledge from the external world, that is, according to him, being is the accidental property of knowledge/thought (Will Durant, 1978). Nevertheless, for the ancient Greeks, truth was the revelation and discovery of existence/being. Plotinus believed in three hypostases: The One, truth about which we have no knowledge; Nous or reason which was being

for Plotinus – for Plato, ideas are emanations of Nous, i.e. the unity between reason the rational; The Soul (or the Whole). They believed in the unity of the reason and the rational and had certain spiritualist, divine and introspective tendencies (Soleymani, 2010).

The mediaeval period: in this period, the philosophers considered unity as being special to God about which human knowledge is not complete. This was summed up in the famous maxim: “Credo ut intelligam” meaning “I believe so that I may understand”. Faith is a consolation for the reason, not a basis for philosophical knowledge. It can only guide reason and warn about the errors. Reason is inferior to faith; it is only a tool (Copleston, 2011).

St. Thomas Aquinas (who along with Augustine of Hippo had a great influence on later thinkers) considered the rational justification for faith as part of faith. This has made him to be considered a dogmatic philosopher in many people’s view. In Aquinas’s philosophy, knowledge should come after self-knowledge because it is through the latter that the former is possible; they are closely interconnected.

In Aquinas’s view, truth manifests itself only in reason. This means that knowledge is always directed toward the subject of knowledge and is modified by it. The object of knowledge (the external objects) is not fully perceived in relation to understanding and divine knowledge, i.e. the truth of the object is distinct from the truth of it as in the subject’s knowledge of the object (this is clearly an Aristotelian touch) (Copleston, 2011).

Aquinas and the scholastics believed that the relation between the perceiver and the perceived is an active one. In other words, both the perceiver and the perceived are active. For Aquinas, knowledge is essentially partial and possible through impressions which turn into partial images in the mind. Then, the active mind abstracts the general from the singular/partial elements so that the “correspondence cause” becomes passive. The human mind does not possess essential forms but has the faculty for perceiving things. This faculty is activated by the non-passive mind, producing a “mental word”. Therefore, abstract conceptualization is the intermediary of knowledge through which the mind perceives the external objects. To evade idealism and Plato’s theory of ideals, Aquinas postulates a second stage for knowledge. For Aquinas, the mind has only a mediated knowledge of the parts, not the whole; the whole does not require an intermediary. Accordingly, the human mind possesses a faculty of knowledge and is not able to understand anything without those mental images.

Certain criticisms have been leveled against Aquinas with regard to knowing God, including the assertion that knowledge based on impression cannot know something infinite and divine. Aquinas notes that, it is possible to know God as the transcendental cause through the material objects (a positivist approach based on negation). Aquinas was not a rationalist. However, he believed that although our knowledge of the infinite is in fact finite at any rate it is a form of knowledge.

It is obvious that Aquinas considers impression as the basis for any form of knowledge, including knowledge of God. Bracketing a few minor differences such as the intermediaries, Aquinas’s views are quite similar to those of Avicenna.

Modern philosophy: Descartes (born: 1596) can be considered one of the most influential figures in modern philosophy. Descartes’s philosophy is the continuation of Aristotelian tradition. His philosophy drew attention to the Stoics, especially to Plato. However, in contrast to Plato, Descartes does not assign a position to truth other than mind, that is, truth is subjective. His famous, “Cogito, ergo sum” implies that one’s existence is prior to the existence of external objects (Copleston, 2008). For Descartes, thinking was the origin of knowledge. Similarly, God’s thinking was the origin of existence. One’s thinking does not create the external world but is able to know the things in themselves whenever the mind is thinking clearly and making transparent distinctions. For Descartes, only distinctions and categories exist. Accordingly, the Platonic unity between subject and object does not hold in Descartes’ philosophy. Rather, knowledge is acquired, and there is a very weak notion of the unity between the knower and the known in the principle of “cogito”. Descartes’ philosophy epitomizes the distance between the subject and object of knowledge in the western tradition of philosophy. In such a view, the relation of the subject and the object is disrupted. The external world does not exist prior to the existence of the thinking “I”.

Spinoza (1632) is another influential figure. He believed that the perceiving faculty should be modified in order to be able to think about eternal salvation not material and mundane things like fame which breeds pain and sorrow. For him, the true food for thought is nothing but love of truth. This is in

fact the ultimate good, i.e. knowledge about the unity of the soul and the nature (pantheism). According to this view, one's knowledge can lead to awareness of the will (Will Durant, 1978).

Spinoza divides knowledge into relation of ideas, matters of fact, direct deduction and most importantly, intuition about the substances/essence (Copleston, 2008). While the second and the third type of knowledge are similar to Aristotle and Avicenna's views, the fourth type is similar to ideas of Suhrawardi, Mulla Sadra and other mystics.

Another important figure in this period is Leibnitz (1646). Like Aristotle and Descartes, he believed in substance (any object has an essence distinct from its properties). For Leibnitz, there are external impression and perceptions which bring about experience while each person has other perceptions as well. In perception, any object is extended into the essence of another object, leading to the emergence of a perception in themselves (Copleston, 2008).

Kant (1804) discussed empirical knowledge and notes that the perceived objects appear within the framework of the two categories of time and space. Kant list twelve categories as the necessary categories of perception among which causality is especially important. For him,

metaphysics is non-empirical and knowledge about thing-in-themselves is impossible (Copleston, 2008).

Kant has been an influential figure in the philosophy of science. Reason epitomizes itself in Kant. For Kant, in contrast to Plato, our knowledge about the world is empirical. One could argue that for Kant it is human reason which organizes the world (the distance between the subject and object, in opposition to the mediaeval philosophy), neither the empiricists who claim to perceive everything by the senses nor the rationalists which consider knowledge as the product of essential assumptions. Kant's theory is referred as transcendental metaphysics.

In Kant's view, science is valuable to the extent that it is a tool for knowledge. Otherwise, knowledge is impossible without science. Kant relates metaphysics to the fundamentals of science and believes that empirical science studies concepts whose aim must be establishing relations with the world (Motahari, 2014).

Hegel (1771) talks about the transformation of the categories into objective realities, independent of the mind. Hegel's arguments are similar to Plato's arguments with regard to the world of ideas. For Hegel, despite the distinctions between the mind and the objective reality they are the same, that is, they become one/absolute whole in one historical moment, which is referred to as absolute knowledge (Will Durant, 1978).

Contemporary philosophy: Hegel has been welcomed in contemporary philosophy on some ground and rejected on others. The emergence of Marxism and pragmatism testify to this fact. One of the most influential contemporary philosophers was Heidegger (death: 1976) who believed in immediate or presential knowledge which is of course quite different from the notion of presential knowledge in Islamic philosophy. For Heidegger, the true philosopher is someone who thinks about *Dasein*; thinking is at best reminiscence of wisdom in the past (Soleymani, 2010).

The Theory of knowledge in Islamic philosophy:

We believe that the theory of knowledge in Islamic philosophy can solve most of the aporias in the western theory of knowledge. In Islamic philosophy, three concepts are distinguished in a theory of knowledge:

First, primary intelligibles/rational reals, which are perceived through the senses, for example, the form of things.

Second, secondary logical intelligibles: when a thing is perceived by the mind it acquires certain categories which are independent from the external world. For example, the principle of universality which is purely a mental phenomenon.

Third: secondary philosophical intelligibles (or relational things) which represent the mind, are not taken from the external world, but represent the external world. This is a puzzle for knowledge, e.g. necessity, possibility and impossibility (Motahari. 1990).

The Islamic philosophers can be divided into two groups in terms of their views about knowledge: rationalists like Al-Farabi and Avicenna and mystics like Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra. The latter were people of faith who tried to rationalize faith with the tool of reason, i.e. logocentric philosophy (MohammadiReyshahri, 1990).

Al-Farabi: Similar to Aristotle, For Al-Farabi, knowledge must be based on certainty. Al-Farabi integrated logics with Islamic principles. However, he does not approve of logicians and rhetoricians' approach to knowledge and notes that truth cannot be achieved by analogy. In his idea, the measure of any truth is the knowledge of the almighty God, angels, Holy book and teachings of the prophets. For him knowledge is the imagination of the intuitive self. The object of knowledge for Al-Farabi is the substance/essence of the thing whose knowledge is imprinted in one's being. Accordingly, there are two ways for gaining knowledge: human acquisition of knowledge and revelation. Knowledge is possible through both of these, to wit, external education, and internal acquisition (thinking). The self is potentially knowledgeable. This potentiality is realized by the help of the angels.

Al-Farabi believed in the theory of intuition. In his view, knowledge is gained through the senses. He notes that the perception of the universals is similar to the perception of the singulars/particulars. However, he believes that the senses are only able to perceive the appearances and the particulars not the underlying truth of things because understanding the truth of things is beyond the ken of human understanding.

Accordingly, the stages for gaining knowledge requires that there should be imagination as intermediary between reason and impression. Despite this the forms are abstract in the mind. Experience is not enough for all forms of knowledge. Our knowledge is either analytic or synthetic, that is, either proved by observation and deduction or through direct speculation (Motahari, 1990).

Avicenna: He divides knowledge into accidental and essential, both of which being contingent on the human essence.

With regard to the necessary sublime knowledge he believes in the unity of knowledge and God because according to monotheistic philosophy, the properties are the same with the essence. For him, human knowledge is passive while God's knowledge is active. God's knowledge is considered to be creative and based on free will. In this view, God is taken to be the origin of abstracts and concretes whose knowledge is both universal and particular. God's

essence is the same with His existence in whom the rational and the real are united, but not in the form of contingencies (Fakhuri, 1988).

However, a human being needs in addition to imagination, free will and a faculty of zeal/enthusiasm which could function as the energy behind the sensory motor and body members, and after which the external tools are moved. So that there is motion in the external matter and something new is created. Therefore, pure imagination is not the representative of power of the will. He believes that knowledge is first gained through impressions and then becomes imaginal and rational through the process of abstraction. In short, Avicenna assumes that the source of knowledge and understanding is the impressions. In contrast to the philosophy of Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra, he does not believe that knowledge is an essential order of one's being.

Suhrawardi: In Suhrawardi's Illuminationist philosophy, essence is primary and existence is the possibility of relational objects. His views are similar to existentialist philosophers' views. In his view, citing Surat: Noor (35), God is the light of all lights from whose source all other things are illuminated.

With regard to non-arbitrary nature of sublime he notes that being and light are the same. Unlike Avicenna who believed that the non-arbitrary sublime knowledge is active, Suhrawardi relates the non-arbitrary sublime knowledge to the creatures through intermediary forms and acquisition, thus, emphasizing the independent nature of the existence of objective realities, not needing intermediate forms. In his view, the ultimate causality of God is based on sense of satisfaction and notes that God's knowledge of His own actions is the same with the actions themselves (Motahari, 1990).

It is clear that Suhrawardi's ideas are oriented toward mysticism and pantheism. He has expressed his ideas through argumentation as well as parables and mysteries.

Mulla Sadra: His transcendental metaphysics is a combination of the Illuminationist philosophy, mysticism, rhetoric and the peripatetic philosophy. In Mulla Sadra's view, existence is a unified truth which begins from God and reaches to the first cause (prime motion). The difference among the creatures is because of their relation to this existence. When someone thinks about the existents the substances appear in his mind. However, outside one's mind there is existence. He considers God as the necessary and non-relational essence (similar to other Islamic philosophers) and notes that the other creatures are manifestations of the light of God, and are related to Him. The existence of God is the same with knowledge and His knowledge is the same with His essence. That is, the existence of everything depends on God. The existence of all creatures is a shadow of the existence of God.

However, unlike other Islamic philosophers, Mulla Sadra does not equate knowledge and existence, as is the case with God. In contrast to Avicenna, he does not believe in the unity of the rational and the real, although this difference can be simply explained.

For Mulla Sadra, knowledge is the "perfection of existence" which is superior to unity all rational meaning can be found in the things, vegetables and animals. That is, he comes to believe in the vegetative, animal and abstract (spiritual) life (MohammadiReyshahri, 1990).

Accordingly, knowledge is the product of the perfection of the essence of the self and thus is not something to be acquired. While thinking, a human being is united with the abstract reals and the active reason and finally becomes abstract himself. This means that as Avicenna said the impression does not enter the mind, rather, the mind takes a shape in relation and proportionate to it. Then, an especial form is made in imagination while in the realm of reason a especial rational form is made which is superior to all. In other words, imaginary and mental images are the prerequisite for rational forms (Motahari, 2014).

Conclusion:

The following can be concluded from the above discussion:

- Our impressions cannot be considered as the only source for knowledge and understanding. Islamic philosophers, or more generally, theologian-philosophers, differ from other philosophers in that they look at things from a religious and spiritual perspective, i.e. their philosophies are influenced by religion. However, in western philosophy, those views which emphasize sensory perception and empiricism have taken the center stage. Despite this, the issue of the theory of knowledge remains an open-ended question in the western philosophy.
- There are certain similarities between the views of those western philosophers who have religious orientations and look at things from a religious perspective and the views of Islamic philosophers. In this essay, the similarities with regard to the theory of knowledge have been illustrated.
- Some of the similarities between the views of the philosophers discussed in this essay include: intuition, presential knowledge, belief in substance, and the dependency of the subject (mind) on the object (external world). However, contemporary philosophy, given its humanistic bend, assumes that it is the subject who gives form and meaning to the external objects, i.e. only those

things exist which can be known by the subject. This views is opposed by Islamic philosophers. One representative of this philosophy, Mulla Sadra has said: "Knowledge is gained by the subject of knowledge and the perfection-seeking existence".

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