



Philosophy in Islam and the West

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Abstract: Undoubtedly, the most significant topic in philosophy is ontology. The Philosophers' viewpoints about the cosmos entirely affect all philosophical thought. In what follows, the author has examined the differences between Islamic philosophy and that of the West, highlighting the origin of these differences. By comparing the concepts of both sides, it becomes transparent why Western philosophy stood aloof from intellect in favor of sense experience and empiricism.

A Glance at Philosophical Schools of Thought

In their drawing the picture of universe, the ancient Greek Philosophers were of the view that both the universe and the creator have one character thus the created beings come with a godly character and some deserve to be worshiped.¹ As the time passed, people began to deny the godly character to the very being of the created beings giving it to the so-called archetypes supposed to have strong human traits and features. Gradually, a few scholars appeared among the Greek peoples who were not satisfied with the archetype theory, instead they believed things as created by causes interpreted differently. Some of them believed the air and some the fire as the origin and cause of things.

Pythagoras who expressed much interest in mathematics held that all things were the products of combination of numbers and their relations; he believed that everything, whether corporeal or incorporeal, complies with one number. This was the first intellectual and incorporeal approach to the origin of the universe considering the incorporeal arithmetic relations as the top of the pyramid of existence. Xenophanes came

with another approach to the universe. As one of the fifth-century BC philosophers and for the first time, Xenophanes proposed the theory of unity among philosophers advising and criticizing the polytheist philosophers. The creator, he says, is eternal and everlasting. He argues that the plurality and alteration of the origin of the universe suggested by the preceding philosophers are no more than the measuring of God's corn with their own bushel. He says that man comes from dust and goes back to dust again. As for the eternity of the origin of the universe, Xenophanes argues that existence has neither a beginning nor an ending. Were it to have a beginning, it should have come into being either from being or from non-being. On the former case, it should have been produced by itself thus not created temporally. The latter case is rejected by the intellect. Again, such a being has no death or annihilation, nor does it have alteration or change. For a change from being is either to being or non-being. Were it to be there as it was before, then no change has happened thus it must still be there. A change into non-being is also rejected by the intellect.²

Socrates, another one of the fifth-century BC

¹ This essay is translated from Farsi into English by Reza Bakhshayesh.

² Mohammad Ali Foroughi, *Sair Hikmat dar Uropa*, Haras Pub. 2009, p. 14.

philosophers who is celebrated as the scholar simplifying the earlier philosophical theories thus bringing philosophy from above down to the earth, argues that it is necessary for mankind to have the faculty of intellect, and there must indubitably be such a faculty in the whole universe. As a result, there is no room for coincidence or happenstance in the course of things happening in the world.

Plato, Socrates' pupil (427 BC), considered the objects of senses as the accidents cannot be known; instead, their ideal forms may be known. Those Ideas or Forms are the perfect archetypes of things or their concepts, and the sensibilia are no more than the shadows of those ideal forms. As to God, Plato argues that because things are in constant movement, no mover for their movement can be imagined except for God.

Aristotle who was born 43 years after his teacher Plato has a similar foundation of thought in the field of philosophy. He considers the sensibilia as the particular matters cannot be known, and instead of Platonic Ideas the substances of things can be the objects of knowledge. He argues that beings are composed of "forms" and "matters" pivot on potentiality and actuality ending at last in the absolutely perfect actuality with no potentiality. It is absolutely still and motionless having no mover.

These ideas comprised the foundation of the would-be ontology for later generations at different periods, however with few alterations. The Jewish people who lived before Christ did not have a metaphysics or philosophy; they used to seek for the absolute truth in the words of Moses and for particular truths in scientific study. The only scholar celebrated as a knowledgeable metaphysician was Philo Judaeus who tried to reconcile the contents of Torah with Greek philosophy. He was the founder of Trinity school to be included in the Christian viewpoint afterwards. Philo's approach about the universe differs from that of Greek philosophers in the fact that they did not stipulate that God created things ex nihilo; instead they believed in the eternity of the prime matter as the origin and manager of the universe. Nonetheless, Philo has stipulated that God is Creator. Having shared the same ideas of Plotinus and being inspired by Plato, Philo founded Christian metaphysics. As said by many, Christianity depends more on the advice and points made by the disciples than on the scholasticism. Due to the political and social circumstances of the two dominant governments of the time (Iran and Rome) particularly in the Middle Ages, there was no room for knowledge or wisdom. At this

time, scholasticism went like hot cakes for every study. Scholasticism demanded the priority of faith over religion thus no room for intellectual independence.

Along with the appearance of Charlemagne in the eighth century AD, a new scientific approach for the ontology was revived. The sources of European researches for the intelligibilia were their brief information from Plato's teachings, because Plato's several works have already been translated into Latin. Augustine, Albert, and Thomas Aquinas were the promoters of Plato and Aristotle's opinions in Europe. This is why the German Albert is celebrated as the Middle Age Aristotle. His works heavily borrow from Aristotle, Averroes, Muhammad ibn Zachariah Razi, and Avicenna's views. God, Thomas Aquinas argues, has manifested His existence by His mercy and through the channel of Jesus Christ to people. Borrowing from Plato and Aristotle and inspired by Avicenna, Aquinas' philosophy was very popular as the conventional philosophy in the religious seminaries and academic centers of Europe for about four hundred years; it is still in effect among the followers of revealed religions, in particular the Catholics.

The first tendency toward empiricism was suggested by Roger Bacon, the thirteenth century English Franciscan philosopher. Bacon is celebrated as one of the pioneers of experiential knowledge. Although he taught Aristotle's works in particular *Secretum Secretorum* in the University of Paris for years, Bacon believed that religion has its own method and science its own thus dichotomy between philosophy and theology.

Philosophy, Bacon says, comprises different kinds of knowledge rubbing off ignorance, while theology is a transcendental knowledge granted to some especial people by God. Geography and mathematics are two disciplines of knowledge to help in better understanding of The Bible. The rank of metaphysics, he argues, is lower than that of mathematics and science, for everything is to be confirmed in the end by experience.³ Such ideas gave rise to his definite family imprisonment for about one month.

After him, the sixteenth century philosopher Francis Bacon proclaimed that our understanding of material things is confined within the scope of our sense observations. Next, comes John Locke as the father of classic empiricism who says that the only valuable beliefs are those confirmed by real experiments. Then,

³ Muhammad Ilkhani, *Tarikh Falsafeh dar Qurun Wusta wa Runesans*, Tehran: SAMT Pub. 2001.

comes in turn Bishop Berkley who was anxious about Locke's ideas lest they lead to skepticism or atheism. He abandoned metaphysics altogether in order to vindicate theology by his own method unknowingly of his ideas leading Hume to empirical skepticism somehow atheistically. Thus Hume came to deluge the arguments for god (especially that of causation) with sharp criticisms. By his denial of spirit, he had already destroyed religion and faith; rather by his denial of the objective causality, which he interpreted subjectively or psychologically, Hume had already destroyed all scientific laws. Hume interpreted causality as the repetition of events leading to the association of ideas in the mind.

Not much later came the eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant who holds that although knowledge begins with sense experiences it cannot be reduced to sense experience. Knowledge, Kant argues, is composed of *a posteriori* data and *a priori* categories of understanding. Two centuries later along with the positivists, the earlier Ludwig Wittgenstein preferred empiricism holding that only those propositions can have a meaning that can be tested by experience or experiment or else they fail to have a meaning or be true. As the so-called father of positivist August Comte has put it, because metaphysical propositions cannot be tested by sense experience they are not scientific thus belonging to the past history.

The nineteenth century went to observe the school of materialism and the twentieth century the school of pragmatism. For in twentieth century William James, the American psychologist, holds that a proposition that has practical utility is true; he proposed his so-called method of pure experience though it covers sense experiences, psychological experiences, and those of religion. Because belief in God's mercy and might is useful for the psychological health, James argues, it is true and to be accepted.

The Fate of Tolerance of Philosophical Views in the West

Such diversity and tolerance in the views of Western philosophers as well as some political and social issues, led the Western scholars to religious pluralism practical and theoretical liberalism, hermeneutics, and that all texts particularly religious texts can be interpreted differently; these are factors paved the way for nihilism.

As a result, the majority of Western schools of thought after Renaissance are inclined to deny any

reality beyond physical matter. Nonetheless, one may find some sort of metaphysics with them however idealistic made by guess and assumption!

Having provided certainty and certain arguments, Islamic philosophy as against the above philosophies went to vindicate the fixed and definite realities beyond the sensible nature necessarily. The Islamic philosophy has constantly followed the right and firm path towards the truths inspired by theistic scholars and philosophers. Nietzsche who at the end of his life came to believe that "there is no such being as God or the origin of universe or even man," had already predicted the appearance of terrifying social and scientific cataclysms and devastating wars in the heart of Europe under nihilism for centuries.

Such psychological doctrinal ethical and social ruins have seriously endangered man of today. The school of western materialism is the major cause of all above consequences. The empirical interpretation of reality will inevitably lead to such a sorry ending.

The Distance Between Sense Perception and Knowledge

Sense experiences however plenty and supporting one another fail to constitute the content of scientific laws or to convey the concept of causality. The denial of causality, as mentioned earlier in Hume's views, stems from the separation of sense perception from intellectual understanding. The opponents of metaphysics have all in one way or another denied all kinds of intellectual understanding confining knowledge to the set of sense perceptions. Such an unfinished knowledge cannot be called true knowledge. It is merely a sense perception or more precisely a superficial proposition of a sense experience.

When metaphysics is denied, no proposition of sense perception can be developed into knowledge. A proposition of sense perception can be developed into a law of nature merely in the light of metaphysics and intellectual understanding, because such development cannot be experienced by the senses themselves. Accordingly, a philosophy dependent on sense experience cannot be embraced as a scientific philosophy; it goes no more than a proposition of sense perception. Knowledge as such applies to general or universal perception that is in need of intellectual efforts. Sense perceptions comprise particular perception as the starting point for the would-be perfect knowledge. Did we experience that a drop or millions of water are fluid

and wet, we fail to draw the general proposition that every drop of water is fluid and wet. Sense experiences or particular perceptions are temporal and limited. For example, we experience at time A and in place B that a particular drop of water is fluid and wet; however, we cannot rightfully draw the conclusion that another drop of water at another time and place is fluid and wet. On the contrary, a general and rational understanding is valid for good having perpetual conclusions. The empiricists have abandoned rationality generality and perpetual conclusions making life meaningless limited vein and dull. This is the very nihilism that has been promoted otherwise as well.

Major Differences Between Islamic Philosophy and Western Philosophy

The main difference between Islamic philosophy and Western philosophy is that the latter does not pay heed to traditional logic or the intellect, or rather gives not much cognitive value to it. On the contrary, the entire arguments of Islamic philosophy are based on intellect and logic. Another difference is that Islamic philosophy deals with ontology (the study of being), while Western philosophy deals with different topics often related to human beings, or to matter, sometimes to language, and the like. As to the objectives, Islamic philosophy aims at knowing the real truth (things as they are), but Western philosophies aim at solving the worldly problems man of today may come across, or at those problems Christianity has encountered.

I gather this brief will suffice for the differences between the two philosophies. In the end, I give my thanks to those helped in holding this scientific gathering and to the audience who stayed here in order to listen to my words. Recommendations and suggestions will be appreciated.

Conclusion

(1) The position of the Creator and its relation with the universe has been varying apparently in views of philosophers of Ancient Greek, but Muslim philosophers had an integrated and consistent idea in the area over the time.

(2) Since the thirteenth century, tendency toward empiricism and dissociation of religious and scientific knowledge was suddenly transformed and accelerated.

(3) After three centuries, credibility of non-empirical knowledge was questioned to the extent that

even the concept of casualty became non-assumable as a subjective matter.

(4) These fluctuations in evaluation of religious knowledge, along with some social and political transitions, created religious Pluralism, theological and ethical liberalism and the concept of Hermeneutics in interpreting religious texts.

(5) Western empirical approach has limited philosophy to the meaning of ontology in perception of superficial phenomena and caused a gap between physics and metaphysics, ignoring that this gap can refrain human being from any conclusion or law making even in empirical sciences, and in addition to ontological problems, it would build a deadlock on human life and his progressing world.

Reply to Charles E. Butterworth (pp. 65-69)

In The Name of God.

I respect all my kind colleagues, who had gathered from all over the world to participate in a scientific conference, and appreciating my savant friend, who studied my essay and wrote a critique on it. In the following, I intend to describe about sensualist versus rationalist philosophers. I hope that I could improve my own understanding about Western philosophers' viewpoints, although I would rather have a direct conversation to be able to exchange ideas better.

Western philosophers can be divided into two categories: (1) Rationalists. The most significant one of this is Hegel the Idealism of the nineteenth Century, with most of the rationalists coming from Germany. Among famous rationalists, we can name Descartes, Kant, Leibnitz, Malebranche. and Spinoza. (2) Sensualists. Who are divided into moderates and radicals.

(a) Moderate Sensuality: This school is the same as empiricism. The trend began in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries from England, with William Ockham (1300-1347) being the inventor. Followers of this idea claim that all metaphysical realities discovered by peripatetic and platonic philosophies are nothing but illusions and dreams. Humans are encouraged to increase experience, to rely on empirical affairs, and to leave religious beliefs and orders for the realm of faith, since reason cannot help there. Ockham divided science into two type of subjective and intuitive to express his views. Intuitive perception, in his theory, was to perceive directly one thing that exists, which could be the perception of the material itself such as "I see Ali," or perceiving a set of materials with their

inter relationships like "I see Ali sitting on a rock." The general feature of any intuitive conception, according to Ockham, is its certainty as it is certain in nature. He claims that subjective science is any abstract that is not intuitive, general concepts such as human, or animal, and demonstrates a set of things of the same type, or an image we have in mind from a past event. Ockham believes that its feature is that from which we cannot judge about existence or inexistence of its members. So, according to him, intuitive science is the only knowledge that leads us to assure of existence or lack of something, and this is the basis for what Ockham calls "empirical knowledge" or "scientific knowledge."

Actually, Ockham believes that our wisdom demands that we do not consider the existence of something, until we ourselves sense it or its effects, and therefore, if we want to act wisely, we should accept only something that we sense itself or its effects, otherwise we cannot believe in the existence of anything. One would have say, "I don't know," if one couldn't find something by sense and through that he believed in a rule which wiped many things out of being, and this rule is known as "Ockham's Razor." Ockham also denied the existence of general concepts. This viewpoint about general concepts such as human, animal, tree, stone, etc., was known as nominalism, a response against Platonic realism and Aristotelian idealistic subjectivism.

Advocates of origin denomination, or nominalists, believed that we have nothing (not in mind nor in outer world) as general concept and these words, which are said to implicate to general concepts, are just a set of codes. In fact, they are common words that have implications on several matters, like a name that a number of families place on their children or a last name that members of a family have in common. Two British philosophers, Francis Bacon in the sixteenth century and Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century, both

relied on authentication of feeling and experience, but the philosophers who became known as empiricists are in fact John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume.

(b) Radical Sensuality: It is Positivism. In the beginning of nineteenth century, Auguste Comte, known as the "father of sociology," founded the radical experimental school of positivism that was constructed upon direct sensible data. Comte even considered such scientific subjective concepts that are not directly observable as metaphysical and non-scientific, and following this trend led to consider metaphysical events as empty and meaningless words. According to Comte, human thought has three phases: A divine and religious phase, in which man assigns events to metaphysic causes; a philosophical phase, in which man seeks the causes in invisible nature of things; and a scientific phase, in which man assesses the quality of creation and interrelationship of phenomena instead of seeking their causes – and this is the phase of positivism.

Positivists went further than Ockham and claimed that actual perception is limited in sensual one; by sensual conception they meant a knowledge which is obtained by bodily touching the things and it remains after cutting in a weaker sense. They believe that something which philosophers call general imaginations or rational concepts, are nothing but subjective words. Such words are true only if they are sensible and can be shown to others, otherwise they are meaningless and empty, and on this basis positivists consider metaphysical things meaningless. They know experience to be limited in sensual experience and they do not care about inner experience and call it non-scientific, because "scientific" means capable to be proved sensually to others. We can call this trend of experimental authentication, sensuality or radical sense authentication. Other known positivists include Ludwig Wittgenstein, Rudolf Carnap, and Bertrand Russell.