

Analysing the epistemological dimensions of Ghazali's notion of revelation. A fresh insight.

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Abstract

At the very beginning man is in search of truth. The knowledge is light or power, by which it is possible to attain the truth. Different philosophers, theologians, and mystics propounded several ways to gain the knowledge. Indian, Western, and Islamic philosophers have some sources common while as some are different. However, Islamic epistemology believes in revelation as one of the primary sources of knowledge. In this paper, the much emphasis is on the concept of revelation especially propounded by al-Ghazali.

Key words: *knowledge, philosophy, epistemology, revelation, reason, intuition, sense-perception.*

Introduction

The term epistemology is derived from two Greek words "episteme" and "logos" former denotes knowledge and later signifies science. It is a branch of philosophy which is concerned with theory of knowledge. Epistemology or theory of knowledge is a collective comprehension of both philosophers of the East and the West, ancient or modern. Some questions are common to both these traditions and some are divergent. Distinctive questions which are associated to knowledge are outstretched in this branch of philosophy e: g., what is knowledge, what is the origin of knowledge, what are the sources of knowledge, what are the limitations of knowledge, what are the conditions of knowledge, what is the validity of knowledge so on and so forth.

According to some Eastern and Western thinkers who categorically defined that empirical knowledge is certain. Whereas there are rationalists whose contention is that reason alone can attain the truth. Moreover, intuitionists believe that truth can be gained through intuition and

its entirely different sensual and rational knowledge. Finally, revelation which is the last tool to know the truth.

Indian Epistemological Views

In Indian epistemological perspective, the Sanskrit term for knowledge is *prama*, (valid knowledge) and *apram* stands for the cognitions which are not true. According to Indian epistemologists *prama* (valid knowledge) is denoted as right apprehension of an object. As per Nyaya view “ All knowledge is a revelation or manifestation of objects (*arthaprakashobuddhih*). Just as a lamp manifests physical objects placed before it, so knowledge reveals all objects which come before it”. (Sharma, p.192)

Both in *Nastik* heterodox and *Astic* orthodox schools of classical Indian philosophy hold different views regarding sources of knowledge. For instance, *Charvakas* school admits only one *pramana* (valid source of knowledge) i.e., perception. *Jainism* accepts three *pramanas* perception, inference and verbal testimony. *Buddhism* accepts two *pramanas* perception and inference but it also believes in verbal testimony. *Nyaya* admits four *pramanas*: perception, inference, comparison and testimony. *Vaisheshika* accepts two perception and inference only. *Sankhya* accepts three *pramanas* perception, inference and testimony. *Yoga* accepts three *pramanas* perception inference and testimony. *Jaimini* is known as founder of *Mimamsa* school who accepts three *pramanas* perception inference and testimony. *Mimamsa* School is further divided into *Prabhakara* and *Kumarila* former accepts five *pramanas* perception, inference, comparison, testimony and implication. While as later admits six *pramanas* perception, inference, comparison, testimony, implication and non-apprehension. *Advaita Vedanta of Sankara* admits six sources as admitted by *Kumarila Bhatta* discussed above. *Ramanuja Vedanta* accepts three *pramanas* like perception, inference and testimony. *Madhva Vedanta* accepts three *pramanas* perception, inference and testimony.

Epistemology in Western philosophy

In western epistemology, philosophers like Descartes, Spinoza and Leibnitz who are rationalists. They are of the opinion that reason is the true source of knowledge. They thought the rational capacity of human mind, which they believe the source to attain the truth both about man and about the world. Even though they did not refute any religious

phenomenon, however their contention was philosophy is an independent from supernatural revelation. Furthermore, they believed that the human mind is designed in such a way that if it can be operated appropriately it can discover the nature of the universe. This was the optimistic view of the rationalists for the human intellect. Moreover, rationalists opined that whatever we can think exists in the world. (Stumpf, 235-236)

On the other hand, the opposite camp of rationalism is empiricism. Its pioneer representatives were Locke, Berkeley and Hume. According to them, the knowledge is not innate in nature as, believed by rationalists, but it is acquired from the external world through sensual organs such as visual organ eye, olfactory organ nose, audible organ ear, gustatory organ tongue and tactual organ skin. Locke certainly refuted the concept of innate ideas as propounded by Descartes. "To begin with Locke holds that mind at birth is *tabula rasa* a clean slate and contains nothing but what experience writes on it". (Masih, .287).

Therefore, the sense-experience is the true criterion of knowledge according to empiricists. In opposition to the above two interpretations Kant acknowledges transcendentalism. For him, the reason alone can't reach true knowledge similarly, mere sense-perception can't attain the true knowledge. However, his dictum regarding knowledge is "percepts without concepts are blind, and concepts without percepts are empty" (Masih .355).

Epistemology in the Islamic Perspective

Islam is one of the Semitic religion and believes in the monotheistic and creationistic ontological perspectives upon the universe. The Holy Quran is the authoritative Book believed to have been revealed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Therefore, the revelation is the specific the significant source of knowledge. Islamically speaking, *al-ilm* is the term for knowledge and *al-ilmis* the revelation. Fundamentally, monotheism is the basic tenant of Islam. Therefore, in order to seek its principles, doctrines, injunctions and dogmas essential to know the revelation. However, there is much emphasis on to understand the world and its phenomenon through the application of reason and observation. So, we can say there is tremendous scope for empirical and rational knowledge in Islam as well. Furthermore, there are supra-empirical, supra-rational, transcendental or metaphysical beings which are above rational or sensual mode of knowledge. So, there is inaccessibility of

this knowledge beyond some point. However, this gap can be full-filled by intuition and revelation. In the history of Muslim thought, we have an encyclopaedic figure who have deliberations and contemplation on different philosophical issues including epistemological one. He was Abu Hamid Muhamamd Al-Ghazali generally known as Imam Al-Ghazali was born in 1058 AD at Tabaran , one of the two townships of Tus in Persia and died at Tabaran in 1111 AD. He completed his early education in his native town Tus he left for higher studies and joined Nizammia University at Nishapur which was a prestigious seat of learning at that time. He studied there under the most eminent theologian and educationist of the age, al-Juwayni. In the curriculum of the university several subjects were contained such as Theology, Canon-law, Philosophy, Logic, Dialectics, Natural Sciences, and Sufism. He studied all these sciences thoroughly and gave early proof of great learning and also of an inclination towards philosophizing. Al-Juwayni his teacher described him as “a plenteous ocean to be drowned”.(Sharif, pp.582-583)

Ghazali’s epistemological notion on revelation

Al-Ghazali investigated all sects like theologians, authoritarians, philosophers, and mystics who were claiming about the true knowledge. Therefore, he studied all these sects thoroughly and passionately. As he admitted himself in his celebrated work *al-munqid-min-addalal* (Deliverance from error) since the childhood he was enthusiastic to know the truth. In view of the same, he profoundly studied all the sects who claimed about knowledge. However, dissatisfied with theologian,authoritarians, philosophers and finally contented with *Sufis* (Islamic mystics). (Al-Ghazali, 20)

He abandoned the bonds of *taqlid* (bondage) ceased to hold him and he lose the grip of all traditional beliefs and turned into scepticism. As scholars of Ghazali mentioned that Kant was “aroused from his dogmatic slumber by the scepticism of Hume”, Ghazali was aroused by his own scepticism. His *Tahafut-al-Falasifah* (incoherence of philosophers) in spirit is comparable to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Like the Critique it is destructive of all rational philosophy by a pointed emphasis on the limitations of human reason. Kant and Ghazali agree that through reason it is impossible for the philosophers to prove the existence of God, soul and its immortality”.(Rafiabadi,pp.144-145)

Al-Ghazali primarily tried to explain what knowledge actually is. He intended to say, that sure and certain knowledge is that knowledge in which object is revealed in such a way that, no ambiguity, error or illusion remains there. Certain knowledge must be infallible and undeniable. “Let us suppose that someone says to me: No, three is more than ten, and in proof of that I shall change this rod into a serpent; and let us suppose that he actually changes the rod into a serpent and that I witness him doing so. No doubts about what I know are raised in me because of this. The only result is that I wonder precisely how he is able to produce this change. Of doubt my knowledge there is no trace”. (Al-Ghazali, p.22).

Ghazali therefore, started his scepticism from sense-perception and on rational knowledge. Accordingly, he said sensual knowledge mostly sight is dubious for example, when we observe shadow of a stick it seems as fixed at one place and concludes that it is stationary. However, after further observation and investigation it seems clearly it is in motion. However, it is not moving quickly but slowly and steadily. Likewise the heavenly body like the sun appears very small, but the geometrical calculations show that it is greater than the earth in size, now if “the visual sense can be so untrustworthy how can we trust upon the authority and other senses,” Ghazali concludes. In this way, he doubted upon sense perception as a valid source of knowledge. Thereupon, he investigated reason and says that intellectual truth as first principle must be believed as being universally true. The assertion that ten are more than three or that affirmation and negation cannot coexist or, that one thing is not both eternal and non-eternal, nor both necessary and impossible are self-evidently true but even though prima facie in contradictable, these assertions can be shown to be acquiescent to doubt, if we hypothetically presume some supra-rational conditions and compare and judge their truth value. (Rafiabadi, pp.132-133). After examining reason, he determined that as he observes sense perception is not valid source of knowledge similarly in spite of his great respect for rational knowledge he concluded that it could not be guaranteed that rational knowledge would be free from error and uncertainty. Finally, he reached to conclusion that above reason there is another judge called intuition or mystical experience which is true source of knowledge. “According to Ghazali, intuition is a supra-intellectual apprehension while there is no proof of its being impossible, nonetheless, it is a matter of taste than mere assertion. It needs a practical experience in order to pursue it. It is a state what

Sufi claim to be as their special state. Sufi considers that these special states or ecstasies take place when they completely withdraw themselves". (Rafiabadi, p.151) If we try to make further analysis of the term intuition in Ghazalian stipulations he says. The highest knowledge is *ilm mukashafa*. *Ilm al mukashafa* is a certitude which is the result of the light that God instils into the heart when it is purged of vices and filled with virtues, through *ilm al muamala*. It is the knowledge which comes to the intimates (*siddiqin*) of God, and relates to God and the unseen. Its bases are direct vision or experience. One realizes with certainty through personal experience the truths which formally one accepted on the evidence of authority or deduction (Al-Ghazali, p.14) ... Through *ilm mukashafa* "doubts are removed & realities are revealed sometimes in their nakedness, though often symbolically. The *ilm mukashafa* is acquired gradually as one's heart becomes more and more purified. Sometimes, in rare cases, it comes with a single leap. Another factor that determines *ilm al mukashafa* is Divine grace. But God promises His grace to those who toil in His way. However, the mysteries that are not revealed on this earth will be revealed in the next". (Al-Ghazali, pp.18-19)

After observing sense-experience, reason and intuition as a source of knowledge. Ghazali acknowledged one more source i.e., revelation. Before examining the revelation, its essential to clear the misunderstanding that Ghazali had totally disregarded reason. He obviously says in his work *mishkatul-anwar* that when reason is abused, what else should be praised afterwards, even *Shariah* (religious law) is known by help of it. Furthermore, man is superior of all other creations and separated from the animals by dint of it. He gets at the hold of the essence of reality of things through it. In addition, he says the "example of Quran is like the light of the sun and that of the reason is the light of eye" (Al-Ghazali, p.87). Nevertheless, he thought without revelation it is impossible to attain certain knowledge about God and His attributes, soul, hell, heaven, existence of angels and all other which come into the metaphysical realm. The reason cannot lead us to the knowledge about the matters hereafter nor can it say about sins whether they are miserable or not and what are the benefits of obedience and worship. These religious matters can be comprehended with the help of revelation. Therefore, God has sent-down the message to the mankind in the form of revelation on Holy prophet (peace be upon him).

According to Ghazali, the Quranic arguments are like food which provide nourishment to everyone while the logical arguments are like medicines as medicine is needed to sick person and food is the requirement of all. The Quranic verses providing the solace to the soul whereas the logical argumentation is not necessary for all. Moreover, the Quranic verses are like water to weak child and a robust youth, while as rational argumentation like a rich food which provides nourishment to the latter but is indigestible and even harmful for children. **(Rafiabadi, 150-151)**

For Ghazali, the highest form of the intuition is *wahy* revelation which is the privilege of the prophets and it is the angel which becomes visible to prophet. However, the *Ilham* is the lowest form of the intuition. The prophetic and mystical experiences are different in various ways. The prophet is always busy with mankind in order to preach and guide them. However, mystic is always busy with meditations and introspection in order to purify his soul. **(Rafiabadi, 163)**

Divine revelation is reliable source of knowledge because God the absolute and ultimate is perfect and infinite. However, man is contingent being, imperfect and finite. So, logically speaking the Divine revelation as compared to human intellect and senses should be more reliable. For Ghazali, Divine revelation is ultimate basis for all philosophies of knowledge. The Divine revelation is truthful, because of its Divine origin, and one can have full faith in the wisdom of it. Therefore, it is indispensable duty to hermeneutically deduce metaphysical, moral and epistemological principles as found in holy scripture and apply these principles in the respective situation of life.

Conclusion

Al-Ghazali was a prominent philosopher of Islam. He wrote several books on philosophy in which he conferred the metaphysical, ethical, eschatological, epistemological issues respectively. He discussed knowledge its nature, and sources. That he found no hope in sensual and rational knowledge, he moved towards the mystical experience. It was actually a transitory shift from one feature of philosophy to another, that he abandoned the philosophy of Aristotle and adopted philosophy of mysticism also propounded by Plato and Neo-

platonian. Therefore, he tried his level best to reconcile mysticism to Islamic belief in a philosophical way.

Revelation and reason are considered as commonly exclusive sources of knowledge. Al-Ghazali holds the view that the religious and rational knowledge are necessary to each other. Nevertheless, the reason is limited as a mode of knowing, and henceforth the reason must subordinate to revelation. The source of religious knowledge is revelation. Reason alone could not attain that knowledge. The source of intellectual knowledge is intellect. We may say, therefore, that al-Ghazali had drawn the distinction between religious and intellectual knowledge on the basis of their sources, that is to say whether they are based on revelation or reason.

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18th January 2020

www.conferenceworld.in

ISBN : 978-81-944855-0-6

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