

Philosophers Denial of God's Knowledge of Particulars.

A Critical Evaluation of Al-Ghazali

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Abstract

In the classical Muslim philosophy, it is found that there is great debate between philosophers and al-Ghazali on various issues of religion. Philosophers tried their level best to employ philosophical thinking in the religious matters. But Ghazali being an intellectual genius and great religious scholar shows them incoherent and inconsistent on rational grounds. As philosophers attempted to say God does not have particular knowledge of the things but He knows universally everything, nevertheless, Ghazali disproves the same. In this study it can be proved how al-Ghazali proves them wrong logically.

Key Words: Philosophy, Philosopher, Logical, Reconciliation, Knowledge, Particular, Universal.

Introduction

Abu Hamid Muhamamd Al-Ghazali generally known as Imam Al-Ghazali was born in 1058 AD at Tabaran, one of the two townships of Tusin Persia and died at same place in 1111 AD. He received his early education in his native town Tus then he left for higher education and joined Nizammia University at Nishapur which was renowned institute at that time. He studied there under the most eminent theologian and educationist of the age, al-Juwayni. In the curriculum of the institute several subjects were taught, such as Theology, Jurisprudence, Philosophy, Logic, Dialectics, Natural Sciences, Sufism etc. He studied all these sciences thoroughly and enthusiastically and gave early proof of great learning and also of a proclivity towards philosophizing. Al-Juwayni his teacher labeled him as "a plenteous ocean to be drowned".¹ Al-Ghazali is one of the distinguished and most original thinker in the Islamic world. He was,

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according to Macdonald, “the greatest, certainly the most sympathetic figure in the history of Islam”, and “equal of Augustine in philosophical and theological importance”.² Being an expert of both theology and philosophy he advocated thorough explanation of both the sciences in order to resolve the tension between the two.

Basically, in ninth century A.D Muslim philosophers for example Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina were acquainted with Greek philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus. The former was enormously influenced by latter's thoughts, ideologies, and doctrines. They thought there could not be any essential disagreement between Greek philosophy and Islamic world-view. Especially philosophers like Al-Farabi and Ibn-Sina were of the opinion that revelation and reason must be in essence complementary and supplementary to each other. Therefore, they endeavored to bring about harmony between Islamic world-view and Greek thought.

However, Ghazali's argument was that Islam and Greek philosophy are two different positions. For him, Islamic world-view and Greek thought are two incommensurable paradigms. Therefore, it is wrong to reconcile the two because “The ontological, cosmological, epistemological, teleological, and eschatological principles proceeded by Greek philosophy and Islam were too totally opposing to be reconcilable by any stretch of thoughts or conceptualizations”³. Consequently, one who is trying to bring about harmony between them is doing an impossible job. In this perspective, he propounded his critical views in contradiction of philosophers in his magnum opus *Tahafut al Falasifah* (Incoherence of the philosophers). Ghazali, was not a rational philosopher as were al-Farabi and Ibn-Sina, but was rather a critic of philosophy, who tried to deconstruct the edifice of philosophy as expounded by Muslim philosophers. It is important to note here that according to some scholars such as “Henri Corbin” that one who is critic of philosophy seized to be a philosopher. In contrast to this view there are other scholars whose argument is that in most cases a critic of philosophy himself assumes a status of a philosopher. For example, in the words of C.A. Qadir, “Philosophy cannot be killed by philosophy itself because demolition of one philosophy gives birth to another philosophy, the criticism of philosophy is philosophy itself”.⁴ As Ghazali himself has expressed the same principle in order to critique of any science in following words, “a man cannot grasp

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what is defective in any of the sciences unless he has so complete grasp of the science in question that he equals its most learned exponents in the appreciation of its fundamental principles, and even goes beyond and surpasses them ,probing into some of the intertwines and profundities which the very professors of the science have neglected. Then and only then is it possible that what he has to assert about its defects is true”⁵. In view of the same ,he studied entire Greek philosophy and its Muslim adherents for two years very deeply .After the completion of studies of philosophies current in his times he presented a highly philosophical book in Arabic entitled *Maqasid-al-Falasifah* (the intentions of philosophers).The book deals with all the branches of philosophy, such as Logic ,Physics, Metaphysics etc. Furthermore, the chief feature of the book is that the complex problems of philosophy have been simplified and the method of the treatment of the subject is so easy that even a man of average learning can comprehend it.⁶Subsequently,he propagated his criticism in *Tahafut- al- Falasifah* in opposition to it. He criticized them by logical approach. Hecountered them by the same technique used by philosophers in reconciliation between philosophy and Islam. He examines the philosophers on twenty propositions seventeen of these propositions he considered are heretical and three of them as irreligious. The three propositions in which he made a decree of irreverence against philosophers are three i.e., eternity of the world,denial of God’s knowledge of particulars, and their denial of resurrection of bodies.

In this study we will attempt to say how al-Ghazali refuted the position of philosophers such as al-Farabi and Ibn-Sina who were of the opinion that God is having only universal knowledge instead of particular.

Philosophers denial of God’s knowledge of particulars

Al-Farabi and Ibn-Sina haddenied the God’s knowledge of particulars. It was a series issue for a philosopher like Ghazali. He explored the nature of Divine knowledge as promulgated by philosophers. They believed that God does not know particulars but universals only. God knows the things in a universal way not particular and His knowledge cannot be affected by the time i.e., there is no past, present and future in His knowledge. Nevertheless, Ibn-Sina specially

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accepted the fact that “nothing -not even as much as a particle of dust, in the heavens, or on the earth -is hidden from His knowledge”⁷but He knows the things in a general way.

In order to understand the philosophy of denial of God’s knowledge of particulars, as advocated by Ibn-Sina specially it is essential to see the arguments advanced by him in a comprehensible manner. He avowed “the philosophical tradition of Hellenism, God, at best, can know only the essence (or universals) and not the particular existents, since these latter can be known only through sense-perception and, therefore, in time; but God, being supra-temporal and changeless and, further, incorporeal, cannot have perceptual knowledge.”⁸

For further, explanation and interpretation it is mandatory to go through in his book *Kitab al Najat* that since God is the emanative cause for all existents, He knows both these existents and the relations existing between them. God knows, for instance, that after such a progression of occasions a solar eclipse would happen, and knowing all the antecedents and consequences of this eclipse. He knows in a determinate way its characteristics and properties; He knows, in this way, what this specific eclipse will be, and can separate it totally from every other occasion even of similar species, viz., eclipse in general. However, when the specific eclipse really happens in time, God, not being dependent upon worldly change, cannot know it. Still, He additionally need not know it right now, He knows it excellently very previously .⁹ Nothing is concealed from His perception. Nonetheless, His awareness into these things continues as before an eclipse, or during it, or after its lapse. What's more, since it does not vary, it requires no alteration in His essence. Basically, he determines, as per his own logic, the limitations of God’s knowledge. He advocated that God knows particulars only in a universal sense. He maintains the view, that God is infinite, perfect Being and pure intellect and therefore pure actuality. Consequently, the approach of knowing to Him is pure intellectual or pure conceptual and therefore universal. Furthermore, the knowledge of particulars pre-supposes sensory faculties which are depend upon time and space whereas He is beyond time and space but the knowledge of universals is transcendental, supra-empirical or beyond the sensuality.

Similarly, he holds the same opinion regarding of His knowledge of all temporal events. What is divisible in period of time, so is the case with the matter and space. For instance, God

cannot know particular person but a general person as a whole. He for example is of the opinion that He has no knowledge of accidents of Zaid or Amir or Khalid; however, He knows the Man-in-general, and his accidents and properties by universal knowledge.¹⁰ Still nothing is above His knowledge.

Ghazal's Critical Evaluation

Ghazali charged that as per this principle it can be said, God knows the specific incident not at that time when it happens but, He knows in advance from all eternity. He knows for example, Amir not as an individual but, knows him universally through His immortal knowledge. Further, He knows Amir whether he would be a believer or non-believer in such and such conditions through His eternal knowledge. And He knew prophets as well in the same universal way i.e., He cannot know a particular prophet as an individual, because this can be known through empirical knowledge and which needs perceiver the sensual organs and He is above all anthropomorphic nature. Therefore, He knows prophethood in general.¹¹

Ghazali, committed decree of blasphemy against philosophers because this kind of belief is in contradiction of religious law. He is very categorical and inflexible about the all-circumscribing of Divine knowledge. He believes "God knows the creeping of the black ant upon the rugged rock in a dark night, and He perceives the movement of the mote in the midst of the air"¹² Ghazali, asked that philosophers distinguish between our knowledge and God's knowledge. As per religious standpoint, God is omniscient means He knows each and everything in the universe whatever He creates. If it is considered His knowledge is universal, how will He take decision about the human being after his expiry and other things.

God's knowledge is unalterable and He knows objects i.e., one from eternity to eternity. He knows everything and different states of cognition -was, is, will be at one look. However, Ghazali argues how it is possible that different cognitions regarding different things be trodden into one cognition? Moreover, if the philosophers assumed that world is unending, then, how it is subject to changes and what does prevent them from believing that God's knowledge does yield change in God?¹³

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Ghazali contends that God's knowledge is in fact independent of the states of space and time. It does not, on that account, reject relation to particulars, which are dependent upon such conditions. The changes to which the method of this knowledge is liable do not involve change in the essence of the knower, but instead in the relationship of His knowledge to the object, that is constantly changing.¹⁴

Ghazali replied that God has just a single knowledge on eclipse at a specific time. Prior to the eclipse, this evidence is the knowledge on 'Will Be'; at the hour of the eclipse, this very knowledge is the knowledge on 'Is'; and after the finishing, it is the knowledge on the expiry of eclipse. Every one of these distinctions can be considered as relations which do not displace the quintessence of knowledge; and which, in this way, do not require a change in the cognizant being. For such differences must be positioned as pure relations. If an individual on your right comes before you, and afterward to left side, it is the relations which disregard you in succession what's more, he who changes appropriately is the moving individual, not you. The equivalent is true for Divine knowledge.¹⁵

Ghazali acknowledged that God's knowledge which is one from eternity to eternity; and unalterable. What on a fundamental level keeps you from accepting that God knows the specific things, regardless of whether that presents change? Have you not held that this kind of progress isn't incomprehensible for His state? Jahm the Mu'tazill accepted that His insight into the temporals is in Time. What's more, some of the later Karramlyah accepted that He is dependent upon temporal occasions. Presently, the main motivation behind why the all-inclusive statement of the People of Truth dismiss this view is that, when change happens, the subject can never be liberated from changes. What's more, that which is never liberated from changes isn't endless. Yet, you accept that the world is everlasting; and that, simultaneously, it is liable to changes! So, in the event that you can loan confidence to the changeableness of the endless, nothing ought to keep you from accepting that the Divine knowledge produces change in God. Thus, it is observed that Ghazali laid much emphasis on Omniscience of God as revealed by Holy Quran.¹⁶

Conclusion

When the Greek knowledge was translated into Arabic. Arab philosophers gone through into the Greek philosophical doctrines, and ideology. They were extremely influenced by the doctrines and ideologies of Greek thought and what they did they tried to reconcile the Islam and Greek thought. Being a Muslim and true peripatetic philosopher, they believe God knows everything but they denied the God's knowledge of particulars. As Muslim orthodox believes that God is Omniscient and nothing is hidden from His sight even a particle of dust. However, philosopher's version is that its intellectually not possible that God knows particular things at any particular time. Their main aim was to explain religious phenomena on pure intellectual plane. However, Ghazali deconstructed this view that their logical account is not valid to explain the things. According to Ghazali, philosophers logically failed to explain that God does not have particular knowledge.

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