

On knowledge as a psychological feature

Glosses on Sh. Mudarris' *Maqalat fi'l-maqalat* 103-104

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The *Maqālāt fi al-maqūlāt* of Shaykh Mudarris is an introductory work for students of the rational and transmitted sciences. It is divided into thirteen main sections: two introductions, ten *maqālāt*, and a conclusion. The second *maqāla* of the work deals with the (Aristotelian) category of quality (*kayfiyya*), which Shaykh Mudarris divides into four types: sensible qualities, psychological qualities, qualities that are specific to quantities, and dispositional qualities. Our focus here will only be on the second of these four i.e., psychological qualities. Of these, Sh. Mudarris treats nine main kinds: life, knowledge, will, power, pleasure and pain, health, wisdom, temperance, and courage. Our focus here will only be on the second of these nine i.e., knowledge, and more specifically, on the part of the discussion where Sh. Mudarris briefly characterizes three main views on the nature of knowledge in the Islamic tradition.

According to Sh. Mudarris, the three views of knowledge are defended by the Islamic philosophers and theologians, respectively; one of the views he reckons as philosophical and the other two as theological. Because Sh. Mudarris' account of the three views is concise, much about them is left unstated and implicit. Consequently, to better understand the details of the views he summarizes and their similarities and differences, we need to do some unpacking of the remarks he offers.

Phenomenological Knowledge and Metaphysical Knowledge

I begin with a distinction between what I will call the “phenomenological” sense of knowledge and the “metaphysical” sense of knowledge. It will be important to keep these two senses of knowledge apart in what follows; for, as we'll shortly see, the former sense of knowledge is something agreed upon by all the Islamic philosophers and theologians, but the latter sense is a matter of controversy among them.

Phenomenological Knowledge:

By knowledge in the phenomenological sense, then, I mean knowledge as it is phenomenally experienced and characterized. For if one engages in some introspection, one will find a number of different states in oneself such as hunger, anger, pain, pleasure, etc. Among these, one state is peculiar in that, unlike these others, it is a state whereby things are somehow manifested or shown to us. We can immediately discern this psychological state in us from the rest, and it is what we give the name “knowledge.” The phenomenology of this state consists of the following feature: being in a state such that something is presented or shown to the subject of the state thereby. The scholars describe this feature by way of different predicates: “revelation” (*inkishāf*), “manifestation” (*zuhūr*), or “representation” (*tamaththul*). In this state, we have three elements: the object revealed, the subject to whom it is revealed, and the “state of revelation” (*hāla inkishāfiyya*) itself, in which state the “phenomenal feel” of knowledge consists. That is, experiencing such a state is the what-it-is-like of being in a state of knowledge. As I said above,

this phenomenological aspect of knowledge is something all parties to the debate agree on, for it is something self-evident and a matter of immediate experience. In their view, its denial amounts to sophistry (*safsata*).

The phenomenological sense of knowledge, then, constitutes the datum which the Islamic philosophers and theologians all accept, but over the precise reality of which they disagree. That disagreement is reflected in how they explain the datum; that is, in the distinct metaphysical theories they go on to offer as to its underlying nature. The claims about its underlying nature are what I'm broadly capturing when I speak of the "metaphysical" sense of knowledge.

Metaphysical Knowledge:

By knowledge in the "metaphysical" sense, then, I mean the ontology of knowledge. That is, we are looking to answer the question "what kind of being or entity is knowledge?" In the Islamic tradition, three broad answers have been offered to this question. According to Sh. Mudarris, they are as follows: (1) knowledge as a qualitative property, (2) knowledge as a relational property, and (3) knowledge as an attribute with a relation. Let us take up each in turn.

(1) Knowledge as a quality

Sh. Mudarris first mentions view (1):

Among [psychological qualities] is knowledge: it is a form obtained from a thing for the soul, directly, as in the case of universals and immaterial particulars, or indirectly, as in the case of material particulars.

و منها العلم و هو صورة تحصل من الشيء عند النفس بالذات كما في الكليات و الجزئيات
المجردة عن المادة أو بالواسطة كما في الجزئيات المادية

View (1) is represented by the Islamic philosophers. According to this view, knowledge, metaphysically speaking, is for the form or nature, F, belonging to the thing known, O, to exist for the knower, K. Consider Zayd, who enjoys knowledge of cats. This view states that Zayd's knowing a cat consists in the form of the cat coming to exist for Zayd. We can then capture the account like so:

(Theory 1) K knows O if and only if O's form, F, occurs for K

Now, recall here the phenomenological sense of knowledge spoken of earlier. In that sense of knowledge, an episode of knowledge takes place when an object, O, is revealed to a knower, K. What Theory 1 adds to this account is that the manner in which O comes to be revealed to K is through O's form, F, where F stands for the nature of O, i.e., that in virtue of which O is what it is. That is, it states that what grounds the "state of revelation" in which O is being revealed to K, is F's existence for K. As such, this form, F, amounts, metaphysically speaking, to a property of K, i.e., one that we say manifests O, or makes it known, to K.

Further, the objects knowable by K fall into three general types: they are either immaterial, in which case they are then either universals (e.g., "humanity") or particulars (e.g., God); or, they are just material particulars (e.g., this cat). K knows the first two types of object directly, which

is to say K intellectually cognizes such objects without assistance from bodily instruments such as eyes and ears. And K knows the second type indirectly, i.e., by means of bodily instruments, such as eyes and ears.

Although the Islamic philosophers all subscribe to Theory 1 as generally stated, they part ways over some important details; details which concern the precise status and nature of the form, F, appealed to in the account. As a result, we come to have two versions of Theory 1; let's call them A and B for the sake of simplicity. I now take up each in turn.

Theory 1: Version A

According to version A, the form, F, existing for the knower, K, has two aspects. Under one aspect, F is said to be "knowledge," and under the second aspect, F is said to be "the thing known" or the object of knowledge. The aspect under which F is knowledge is when F is considered in itself, while the respect in which F is the known is when F is considered insofar as it reveals or represents something to K. Thus, on version A of Theory 1, a single item, i.e., F, is both knowledge and the thing known, but in different ways. These two ways are related in the following manner: the respect under which F represents or reveals is a feature that's grounded by F in itself, i.e., in the aspect under which F is knowledge. These two aspects give F a twofold metaphysical status. On the one hand, *qua* knowledge, F is an external existent, and as such, it falls under the (Aristotelian) category of quality. This is because it subsists by or in its subject, K. On the other hand, *qua* thing known, F is a "mental existent" (*mawjud dhihni*). It is a mental existent in that F, in K, shares the same nature with O outside K, but differs from the latter just in the mode of its existence. That is, F, as a mental existent in K, has a certain quidditative core in common with the O that externally exists. This core is what guarantees mind-world correspondence, even though the existences radically differ. For F's mode of existence as a mental being, according to the proponents of account A, is a *sui generis* mode of being opposed to external existence i.e., of the kind O enjoys. Therefore, as a mental being, F does not inhere in K; in fact, it resists membership in one of the ten categories altogether.

Version A of Theory 1 is the view of the majority of the Islamic philosophers.

Sh. Mudarris sums it up as follows:

The philosophers have separated into two camps about [the form]. So [one] camp is upon [the view] that it is united with the possessor of the form. And insofar as it is impressed in the soul, it is a shadowy existent that corresponds to the possessor of the form, and is the thing known, and does not fall under any of the categories. But insofar as it subsists by the soul and characterizes it, it is a real existent, an accident, a quality, and knowledge. This camp has become well-known as the people of reality and the adherents of mental existence. Knowledge and the known on this [view] is what is in the mind, and the two are the same essentially but different in consideration.

و منها العلم و هو صورة تحصل من الشيء عند النفس بالذات كما في الكليات و الجزئيات
المجردة عن المادة أو بالواسطة كما في الجزئيات المادية و افتقرت الحكماء فيها فرقتين فرقة على
أنها متحدة مع ذي الصورة فهي من حيث ارتسامها فيها موجود ظلي مطابق لذي الصورة و معلوم
و ليست مندرجة تحت شيء من المقولات و من حيث قيامها بها و اتصافها بها موجود أصلي

عرض و كيف و علم و قد اشتهرت هذه الفرقة بأهل الحقيقة و بأصحاب الوجود الذهني و العلم
والمعلوم على هذا هو ما في الذهن و هما متحدان ذاتا و متغايران اعتبارا

Theory 1: Version B

Next, we have version B of Theory 1. It is similar to version A in important ways, but it crucially differs in one aspect. Like version A, version B construes knowledge as a qualitative, accidental property, i.e., subsisting by, or inhering in, the knower, K. And like version A, version B recognizes that F also has a representational feature or aspect to it. However, unlike version A, version B does not additionally posit a *sui generis* mode of being, i.e., mental existence, that F enjoys *qua* the object known. Thus, in version B, F (in K) also does not literally share with O, the object outside K, some common nature or quidditative core, i.e., existing in different ways; rather, F is simply similar to O, meaning it in some way resembles it. Consequently, on version B, F is likewise not, as it is on version A, both knowledge and the thing known, though considered in different ways. Rather, it is always just knowledge, something always doing some representing. And the object known is always something outside the mind, always being the thing represented. But, it can be outside the mind in two ways: either really, which is to say represented to K as an actually existing object, or only hypothetically, represented to K as a possible object i.e., one that doesn't exist out there but may do so.

Sh. Mudarris states the B account of Theory 1 as follows:

[Another] camp is upon [the view] that [the form] is a simulacrum and a likeness of the known, and so it is a real existent, an accident, and a quality always. That which is in the mind is knowledge and what is outside [the mind], really or hypothetically, is the known. This camp has become well-known as the proponents of the simulacrum and likeness. [All] this is according to the philosophers.

و فرقة على أنها شبح و مثال للمعلوم فهو موجود أصيلي عرض و كيف دائما و ما في الذهن علم
و ما في الخارج حقيقة أو تقديرا معلوم و قد اشتهرت هذه الفرقة بأرباب الشبح و المثال هذا عند
الحكماء

(2) Knowledge as a relation

Having treated the views of the Islamic philosophers on knowledge, Sh. Mudarris then moves on to briefly consider those of the Islamic theologians, meaning view (2) mentioned above. He states:

As for the theologians, the majority of them are upon [the view] that [knowledge] is a relation between the knower and known, [...].

و أما المتكلمون فجمهورهم على أنه إضافة بين العالم و المعلوم (...)

According to proponents of view (2), knowledge is not a qualitative state or property but rather a relational one. That is, to be in a state of knowledge for them is not, as it is for the Islamic philosophers, to be in a representational state; instead, it is to be related in the right sort of way to the object known. So, we capture the account like so:

(Theory 2) K knows O if and only if a right relation, R, obtains between K and O

As is evident, this account discards the main elements of both versions of Theory 1. For it eschews all talk of “form,” and therefore rejects not only any F inhering in the mind, and any F having a special kind of being in the mind, but it also rejects any F doing any representational work, i.e., in relation to the knower, K. The upshot of this is that, in Theory 2, for K to have knowledge of O is not for O to be represented to K, i.e., by means of its form, F. Rather it is for K to just bear an appropriate relation, R, to O, and where the appropriateness of R consists in it being a “presentational relation,” not a representational one. That is, this account holds that once O is present, i.e., with its concrete being, for K, and all obstacles are removed (e.g., K isn’t inattentive, etc.), K will perceive or cognize O. No form, F, is needed to mediate that transaction. This R between K and O, considered from the side of K, is called “awareness” (*shu ‘ūr*) i.e., when we speak of K’s being aware of O, and considered from the side of O, it is called “presentation” (*hudūr*) i.e., when we speak of O’s presence to K.

(3) Knowledge as an attribute-relation

Theory 2, as we see above, construes knowledge as something purely relational. However, Sh. Mudarris also briefly notes a third view, upheld by certain “verifiers” among the theologians. According to this account, knowledge is not solely a relation, but an attribute-relation complex:

[...], and [from among the *mutakallimun*] their verifiers are upon [the view] that it is an attribute possessing a relation.

و محققوهم على أنه صفة ذات إضافة

In this last view, I take it that knowledge consists of a non-relational or monadic element, and a relational one, and the latter is a feature of the monadic element. However, it is not clear to me how this account amounts to a distinctive alternative; rather, it seems to be reducible to one of the two versions of Theory 1 we went over above. For those accounts, too, recognize that knowledge contains a relational element, with the difference being they hold that this relational feature of knowledge is an accidental feature, though a necessary accident to be sure. In other words, they hold that relationality is not part of knowledge’s essence. For its essence, as we saw, is to be qualitative. But insofar as this last view gives knowledge a non-relational base, which base consists of an “attribute,” the account seems compatible with (if not reducible to) the theories of the Islamic philosophers. For one can ask about this underlying “attribute” which bears the relation: what kind of attribute is it? If it turns out to be a qualitative attribute, then the reduction goes through. And the view that Sh. Mudarris attributes to the “verifiers” among the theologians will turn out to be the same, at least in crucial respects, as that of (one of the two views of) the Islamic philosophers. Furthermore, Sh. Mudarris himself seems to let on as much, for his account appeals to the notion of a cognitive faculty (i.e., intellect) and that of forms obtaining in it, which forms constitute knowledge proper. For this reason, perhaps the most just thing to say about view (3) is that it amounts to a third version, version C, of Theory 1.