

Probing the Methodology of Avicenna's Epistemic Theories

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In the present research, the aim was to examine some of the metaphysical foundations of knowledge from the view point of Avicenna whose theories of knowledge were influentially echoed in the epistemic theories in the Islamic world and the next schools of thought. The main problem with the statement of current research is a critical question of whether Avicenna's metaphysical foundations are capable of forming a representative operation for our knowledge that is accurately representing the external world. If his metaphysical foundations fail to justify the fact that our knowledge represents the real world as it is, the metaphysical foundations of his epistemology, in spite of his realism, would inevitably slip into a fundamental gap between the known-object and the knower-subject. Such research on the principles of epistemology of Avicenna who is one of the pioneers of major thought stream in Islamic philosophy i.e. Peripatetic philosophy, can open up new perspectives for further systematic research on epistemic aspects in his doctrine.

Keywords: *Avicenna's metaphysical, knowledge, epistemology, Islamic philosophy*

Introduction

Studying under the topic of knowledge involves conducting researches with a broad subject whose different disciplines address the issue of knowledge in which philosophy is known as the theory of knowledge for which the technical word is 'epistemology' from the Greek Episteme (knowledge) (Audi & Audi, 1999). By studying what is known as Islamic philosophy, it is interestingly showed evidenced that fundamental epistemic issues were also dispersedly presupposed in Muslim philosophers' works such as Avicenna. However, since the majority of Muslim philosophers did not consider epistemology as an independent discipline, Avicenna dealt with this realm of knowledge quite fragmentarily. His theories of existence, the

reality of knowledge, specially, those of God's knowledge were controversially debated by *Mutakallimun*, Muslim theologians who were engaged in constructing Islamic theology (*Kalām*) (Wisnovsky, 2003). In fact, Avicenna's epistemic expositions have been propounded within an interconnected set of different ideas that are related to various philosophical discussions such as ontology, cosmology, theology, psychology and even logical concepts. In other words, Avicenna did not concern these problems as essentially discrete subjects but as issues constructing the whole structure of human knowledge (Gutas, 2001). It means that any attempt to determine his epistemological position without having a comprehensive view to his whole philosophical system is bound to fail.

Avicenna dealt dispersedly with epistemic theories trying to centre first on explaining God's knowledge and second to explicate the human knowledge. As to human knowledge, his epistemic discussions mainly deal with explaining the relationship between the known-object and the knower-subject as two actual realities. It means that his epistemology is chiefly pendular between subjectivity, the conditions of knower who knows something and objectivity, the ontological position of the known object. Based on this approach, we can consider Avicenna's psychological and metaphysical discussions as two main realms in which his epistemic theories could be explored.

In his psychological debates, the commentators reflect in detail on different cognitive faculties which are common between human beings and animals. The role of human intellect and its mutual interaction with other cognitive faculties in the process of abstraction occupies a large part of Avicenna's psychological discussions (Ibn Sinā, 1959). His contributions in logical syllogism as a subjective methodology of acquiring knowledge has been examined by others such as Adamson (2005) and Burnett (2005) who discussed the transmission of Avicennian innovations in these issues into Medieval Latin Philosophy. Deborah Black (2013) examined Avicenna's description of certitude and justification which are considered as two elements of human knowledge (Black, 2013). She focuses within a set of articles on Avicenna's psychological arguments in explaining the functions of internal sense faculties such as cogitative and estimative powers as the most significant cognitive faculties of human beings. She also examines the notion of self-awareness from the standpoint of Avicenna's scenario of floating man, an issue which originates from his psychological attitude (Black, 2008). Marmura (2005), another interpreter of Avicenna's philosophy, examines in one of his books different psychological and epistemic aspects of the scenario of floating man. Some aspects of Avicenna's theory of subjectivity are the core of Kaukua's research on Avicenna's epistemological system (Kaukua, 2007). The epistemic aspect of Avicenna's experience of floating man is controversial among Latin scholastics and has been compared with modern tenets such as Cartesian cogito (Yaldir, 2009).

On the other hand, in his metaphysical arguments, Avicenna involves the different levels of

existence, explaining the ontological positions of intelligible forms emanating from active intellect as the source of intelligibles. Al-Rahmān (1985) and some other Avicenna's commentators supporting this idea argued that the ultimate cause of the production of new intelligible forms in an individual's mind is a direct emanation from the agent intellect (Black, 2005). Accordingly, the researchers working on Avicenna's epistemic theories mainly seek his fundamental epistemic theories either in his psychological ideas or in his metaphysical expositions.

However, since epistemology was not known as an independent discipline by the majority of Muslim scholars such as Avicenna he did not focus on different dimensions of this realm systematically. This insufficiency sometimes prevents a clear interpretation of the foundations of his philosophical systems. In fact, issues concerning knowledge have been discussed intermittently by Avicenna on various subjects such as metaphysics, physics, psychology, theology and logic; consequently, each of the mentioned discipline concentrates on one aspect of knowledge from its point of view. That is why we see some researchers waver in confusion when determining their epistemic expositions.

Besides the insufficiency, a study on Islamic philosophy demonstrates the main engagement of Avicenna's commentators is to elicit and draw some epistemological outline compatible to his realist doctrines. In fact, it is presupposed by Avicenna's interpreters that first of all he was a realist philosopher and second his epistemic theories must be compatible to his realist attitude. The difference between his commentators originates only from some epistemic issues discussed dispersedly and sporadically by Avicenna to aid him in explaining his other metaphysical discussions. A study on Avicenna's philosophy shows that there is no sceptical theory in his epistemology and most of his commentators only concentrate on some convincing interpretations utterly compatible with a realistic perspective.

To pave the way for a critical study of Avicenna's epistemic exposition, we have to change the lens through which Avicenna elaborated on explaining his epistemic theories. Relying on the theory of coessentiality or identical quiddity, which will be discussed in the research, Avicenna settled his epistemic optimism on an explanation of how the knower-subject knows the known-object. If we change the paradigm from the question of how the knower-subject knows into why the knower knows, it would be possible to question how much Avicenna's explanation is compatible with his realist perspective. This paradigm change in analysing Avicenna's philosophical thought could bring the study of Islamic philosophy from mere interpretation of what he thought into what could be elicited from his school of thought and also it could prepare an opportunity for other research to determine the room of Islamic philosophy in the modern school of thought.

Avicenna's epistemic methodology in his realist attitude

Avicenna is a classic example of realist scholars in the Islamic world. In addition to its literal meaning, his realism connotes that we are facing the external world whose existence does not depend on our minds. This specific meaning of realism leads us to a salient fact that the starting point of Avicenna's approach to the relationship between the human intellect and the external world was not a doubt. In other words, the relationship was not a starting point for Avicenna to establish his philosophical system on it, the method that we see in Cartesian doctrine. Unlike the latter which starts with a fundamental doubt, Avicenna opined that human being can know the external world accurately as it is, and the process of this knowing is dispersedly explained in different parts of his philosophical works. Therefore, study of Avicenna's epistemic theories should be generally based on the presupposition that we are identifying the principles of the epistemic ideas of a thinker who holds that we can know the external world accurately.

Indeed, Avicenna only tried to speculate the mechanism of act of knowing in the manner of his own philosophical system. Simply, his main epistemological engagement was to explicate how we know, not why we know. If we change the paradigm from the question of how the knower-subject knows into why the knower-subject knows, it would be possible to question how much Avicenna's explanation of the relationship between the knower-subject and the known-object is compatible with his epistemological realism. To pave the way for a critical study of his epistemic views, we have to change the lens through which Avicenna elaborated on explaining this relationship.

In knowing the external realities, the principle of Avicenna's analysis is the distinction between quiddity (essence) and existence, the two metaphysical terms implicitly predominant in most Islamic philosophical debates. As to the origin of the doctrine of the distinction between quiddity and existence, although studies show controversy among scholars, numerous witnesses trace its source back to Aristotle (Moris, 1998). Avicenna begins with an essential point regarding the ways that quiddities of objects could be considered either as existing in reality, including the mind and the external world, or in themselves if quiddities are simply considered in terms of what the objects are, while the question of their existence is totally ignored. For instance, when we consider the concepts of hoarseness, triangle, or morality, we regard these quiddities qua quiddities regardless of whether such an animal, shape or virtue exists or not. When such a concept of quiddity qua quiddity exists, it will be actualized either by mental existence as mental form or by external existence as an objective concrete reality. Such a concept of quiddity qua quiddity, apart from its existence, is a metaphysical analysis that marks the line between mental forms and the external objects as the correspondent of the forms. This theory refers to the ontological postulation of distinction between quiddity *māhiyya*

and existence *wujūd* formulated by al-Fārābī¹ in the Islamic philosophy and then developed by Avicenna who made it as one of the fundamental principles of his ontology.

The distinction between existence and quiddity originates from human's two fundamental questions of everything one of which concerns what something is and the other relates to the fact that it exists. If someone for instance knows the quiddity of something with definition, they know what it is. After knowing what it is, the question still remains does such a thing really exist. Hence in knowing something, we face two separate issues: the quiddity and the existence of that thing. We deal with the two issues based on two modes of fundamental questions: what is it and does it exist. Questions of what the object is and that specific thing refers to the essence or the quiddity of the object. However, questioning the existence of an object seeks whether the object exist in the real world. The explanation could be more clarified when we imagine geometrical ideas such as circles or lines which are not realised in the external world. However, regardless of their condition of not existing, we can imagine the quiddity of circle or line in our minds.

The quiddity of the object, regardless of whether it is existent or non-existent in the objective world, could be apprehended by human mind as a mental form. Avicenna's development of this theory can be explicated in two forms: the first is his elaboration of the occurrence of existence to quiddity as a kind of accident of quiddity and the second is his ontological categories of necessity (*Wujūb*) and contingency (*imkān*) (Megawati, 2003), which both are applied to explain the fact that an object has a quiddity which can be actualised either in the mind or in the external world. In other words, the quiddity qua quiddity can be actualised either by mental existence in our mind, or by external existence in the outer world. According to this explanation, the existence is a contingent accident of the quiddity which if occurs in the mind, the quiddity would appear with mental existence and if occurs in the external world, the object would have an external existence. The former state of the quiddity is considered a mental form (*al-ṣūra al-zehniyya*) and the latter is called concretely existent (*al-wujūd al-'ainiyya*). Accordingly, for Avicenna, the mental form actualised by mental existence provides the passage over the epistemic gap between human soul as the knower-subject and what he knows as the known-object in the external world.

It is worth noting that the effects of the external world of quiddity differs from its mental existence. For instance, some effects of the external existence of fire is heat and burning while the fire lacks such effects when it is actualised by the mental existence because we perceive no heat imagining the fire. The significant effect of mental existence of the quiddity is its representative property; that is, when we imagine the form of something such as the fire, it represents merely the fire to us whether the form has a correspondent in the external world or it does not have any concrete object.

¹ See passage of the *Fuṣūṣ* translated into English by Izutso in Concept, 91-94

Avicenna's definition of perception is firmly based on the ontology cited above. He mainly defines perception as obtaining the form of perceived objects (Ibn Sinā, 1404). As sense perception in Avicenna's epistemology plays the primitive role, from a special perspective, his definitions of knowledge is laid under the notion of perception (*al-Idrāk*) intended to convey the function of sensory organs in perceiving the sensible forms. From a specific vantage point, however, his emphasis on the capacity of human intellect in abstracting universals from particular forms is not deniable. The significant point is that in perception Avicenna proposes a special condition for the form of perceived objects. This condition is clearly given in the book of "*al-ishārāt wal al-tanbihāt*" where he claims that perception occurs when the essence of the object is disembodied (*Tajrīd*). "When the thing is sensible, it is covered by veils extrinsic to its quiddity" (Inati, 2014). That is, the sensible object is covered by some material attachments such as specific quality, quantity, place, position and others. However, based on Aristotelian approach, the condition of being detached from these material attachments is necessary for the form of the object to be apprehended as an intelligible form. The process of detachment is fulfilled through a mutual interaction between external and internal senses under the leadership of human intellect. In fact, human intellect abstracts the intelligible forms from particular sensible forms by disembodiment of the sensible forms from material attachments. Therefore, the particular form of an object is primitively obtained by sensory organs and through a process of disembodiment could be apprehended by human intellect as imaginal and finally intelligible form which is real human knowledge.² That is, the quality of being detached from material attachments is necessary for the form of the object to be perceived.

In Avicenna's definition of perception, the statement of 'being represented to the perceiver (*Mutamathila inda al-Mudrik*)' refers to a specific state of presence that determines the type of relationship between the known-object and the knower-subject, i.e. the relationship is direct or indirect. "to apprehend a thing is to have its reality represented to him who apprehends such that it is observed by that with which he apprehends" (Shams, 1950). In fact, Avicenna with this expression suggests a special notion of presence in which the reality of known-object not only is present to the intellect but it also gives a state of apprehending to the intellect.

To identify the foundation of Avicenna's epistemology, we have to analyse the concept of this specific presence which is capable of apprehension. To obtain the goal, first it should be determined what is present to the intellect when Avicenna says the reality is represented to the human intellect. Second, it ought to be clarified how the reality is present to the human intellect, directly or indirectly. This issue determines whether Avicenna is a direct or an indirect realist philosopher.

² The explanation refers to Universalism underlying a kind of reality for universals independent from particular sensible objects. For philosophers such as Avicenna intelligible forms or universals are the essential concepts of theoretical knowledge including: Metaphysics, Mathematics and Natural Science.

Is Avicenna a direct or an indirect realist philosopher?

The dispute between direct and indirect realism is based firstly; on believing in a real independent world outside our mind and secondly; on the fact that we can know the external world. Hence, it is an epistemic and metaphysical engagement of a realist thinker than of a sceptic or idealist thinker. According to indirect realism, perception is a triadic relationship between the perceiver, the perceived object in the external world and the mental form which appears in the perceiver's mind (Brown, 1992). While the perceived object is indirectly known for the subject, the mental form is directly known and represents the external object. Based on direct realism, the third factor, mental form, is eliminated so that the subject of perception knows the concrete object directly; and it is assumed that it leaves us in a better epistemic position than does the indirect realism.

Since Avicenna is a realist philosopher who believes in the independent external world, the representative character of mental form in his definition of perception marks the line between direct and indirect knowledge. According to him, corresponding to an object in the external world, the mental form itself is directly present to human intellect. However, the external object is indirectly present to human intellect through the mental form. Of course, we do not see clearly in Avicenna's works in such a category, but through the study of his works we could elicit the framework of direct realism in self-awareness and indirect realism in knowing everything outside the self. Hence, based on being directly or indirectly present, the objects of knowledge for Avicenna are divided into two main groups. The first are the inner objects including mental forms, human soul as an independent real fact and its different psychological states such as self-awareness and the second; are the external objects consisting of the extramental world and the concrete objects in it. The former are realities represented to human intellect without any mental form and they themselves are directly apprehended by human intellect. Here Avicenna holds a kind of unity between the known object and the knower subject, a specific knowledge which was later known as presential knowledge or knowledge by presence (*al-'Ilm al-Ḥuzūri*). Based on this subtle distinction, Avicenna as a realist thinker, defines the apprehension of something as either having its reality present to the person who apprehends it or the presence of form of that reality to the person.

From the standpoint of Avicenna's view, the human mind at the beginning of life is in the stage of potentiality emptying any kind of thought and gradually sensory organs receive some impressions by establishing a direct contact with the material world. Here, he puts forward Aristotelian theory of potency to prove that there is a kind of passive and active relationship between human intellect empty at birth and the external objects (Knuuttila, 2008). In fact, sense perception plays a primitive role in knowing the external world and within a cognitive process provides the opportunity of apprehending intelligible forms. Hence, for Avicenna, the knowledge of the external world is of different levels that initiates from sensation and proceeds

to apprehension of imaginal and ultimately intelligible forms emanating from a higher level of existence, the theory referring to the emanation of intelligible forms from the active intellect (al-‘aql al-fa’al).

The theory of the emanationist in Avicenna’s philosophy originates from his ontology which constitutes the structure of his cosmogony and cosmology. In fact, Avicenna offers an explication of the universe based on a kind of emanationism whose history goes back to Plato’s analogy of the goodness to the Sun as well as his concept of goodness as the light of the intelligible world of forms (Alshehhi, 2016; Irai & Lu, 2018; Knuuttila, 2008; Neminno & Gempes, 2018). Plato explains the emanation of the world of the forms in terms of the emanation of the light from the sun. Although Plato’s analogy of the sun and its light gives insight into the emanation process of world, this theory appears in full clarity in the philosophy of Plotinus.

Analyzing Avicenna’s coessential theory

As to what is present to the human intellect, two explanations are assumable: first, the individual essence of the known object is present to human intellect and second; instead of the essence its mental form is present. Therefore, whenever a knower-subject knows an object, it could be asserted within a veritable disjunctive proposition that either the individual essence of the known-object or the mental form of its essence is present to the intellect of the knower-subject. The former assumption in some cases lead to serious philosophical contradiction. For instance, when we imagine subjects that do not actually exist in the external world, we cannot argue that the individual essence of something that does not exist is present to the intellect. Most of the geometric shapes, for example, are such that while we imagine and apprehend them, they are not in the real world. Or even a concept such as non-existence and contradiction which in effect do not have any reality are understandable for us. The crucial question here is that if the essence of an object appears to human intellect, how are we able to apprehend the concepts which either do not have any object or could not have any object in the external world such as non-existence? Hence, the latter assumption cited above, claiming that the mental form of essence of object is present to human intellect, is acceptable.

After accepting that the mental form of essence is present, still a question nags what explains the representative function of mental form? To identify the function of this representation, the relationship between the mental form of essence in the human mind and its concrete object in the external world should be noted. In his definition of apprehension, Avicenna explicates this relationship relying on a kind of coessential identity between mental form of the essence and its external object. This concept could be elicited from the same definition of apprehension:

“to apprehend a thing is to have its reality represented to him who apprehends such that it is

observed by that with which he apprehends.” [ibid] The definition explicitly expresses that, according to Avicenna, apprehension occurs when the reality of the object is represented to the knower subject. The reality of the object refers to the quiddity (Mahiyyah essence) of the known object that appears in human intellect as a mental form. By the word reality, Avicenna gives emphasis to a kind of unity and sameness between mental forms and their correspondent objects in the external world. This is a specific unity which is based on coessentiality, sameness of the essence, which explicates the cognitive relationship between human intellect and the objects of knowledge.

Relying on coessential unity between mental forms and the objects of knowledge in the external world, Avicenna explains how we know everything objectively. In Avicenna’s epistemology, the nature of correspondence theory is changed into identity theory i.e. being the same as something else, to explicate the representative function of mental forms present to human intellect. Therefore, for Avicenna, a kind of coessential unity between the mental form of essence and its object explains the representative function of the mental forms.

The contents cited above indicate that Avicenna proposes his epistemic optimism relying on the identical quiddity which is either actualised by the external or mental existence. The theory originates from his special ontology. Whenever the quiddity is actualised in the external world, it bears its special properties such as extent, place and others and when the same quiddity appears with mental existence, being representative is its most important effect.

First, this explanation accentuates that not only Avicenna denies that the external world is a projection of our mind, but he also holds it as a mind-independent fact outside the knower and marks its impression on the human mind. Second, it indicates that Avicenna relying on the correspondence theory explains the relationship between the known object and the knower subject.

To examine the weak and strong points of this theory, we must prove the forms present to mind accurately represent their objects and really correspond to them. For the purpose, Avicenna suggested the theory of identical quiddity or coessentiality which is an ontological ground to establish his epistemic optimism. In fact, the nature of correspondence theory is changed into the theory of identity in Avicenna’s scholarship to explain the sameness of essence of the known object in the mind and the external world.

The main question could be raised here is how we can prove that the quiddity of an object in our mind is identical with what is in the external world? The nature of this question is the same as the problem propounded in the correspondence theory, a criticism that could lead to idealism. Of course, this is not an epistemological question in Avicenna’s doctrine because it refers to his ontological explication underlying the sameness between the essence of objects with mental and the external existence. But as there is not any fundamental sceptical theory in



Avicenna's ontology, such question still remains incontrovertible in his epistemology.

Conclusion

Avicenna's epistemology is intimately compatible to his ontological criterion whose nucleus is the distinction between quiddity and existence. For Avicenna, the forms present to mind accurately represent their objects in the external world and really correspond to them. To prove the claim, he suggests the theory of identical quiddity which is an ontological ground to establish his epistemic optimism. In fact, the nature of correspondence theory is changed into the theory of identity in Avicenna's scholarship to explain the sameness of essence of the known object in the mind and the external world.

However, Avicenna does not propose to explain how can we prove that the quiddity of an object in our mind is identical with what is in the external world, the similar problem propounded in the correspondence theory. Of course, this is not an epistemological problem because it refers to Avicenna's ontological exposition which explains a kind of unity between the quiddity of known objects in human mind and in the external world.

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