Multiplicity of Knowledge Forms: Lessons from Islamic Epistemology

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> And say (O Mohammed): My Lord! Increase me in knowledge. (20:114)

In the above verse from the Qur'an, God enjoins the Prophet Muhammad to literally plead for knowledge. I believe that this verse has very significant implications for the topic of Islamic epistemology. Not only does God make a categorical statement about the importance of the pursuit of knowledge in human endeavor,[1] but He also declares Himself to be the fountainhead of all knowledge in the universe.

Does all knowledge come from God? If so, what is the nature of humanity's pursuit of knowledge? Can we discern between various forms of knowledge and make qualitative or moral distinctions between them? These are fundamental questions that constitute the building blocks of Islamic epistemology. In traditional Western philosophical circles, however, Islamic epistemology has been relegated to the status of a historical artifact, an older form of inquiry which has been supplanted in the current age by Western concerns. The importance of Allama Mehdi Ha'iri Yazdi's book *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence* is precisely that it reintroduces Islamic epistemology as a living, vibrant, and practiced tradition. For that reason alone, this is a very important book.

I am not a philosopher by training; as a consequence, I found this book to be heavy going. But to the extent that I was able to understand it, it was a very illuminating experience. This article addresses people such as myself, who are concerned with issues of epistemology and yet would be more comfortable with a weaker dose of philosophical terminology. In my

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opinion, in order to make sense of any discussion on epistemology and Islam, one should deploy a set of framing questions that one believes any Islamic epistemology needs to address. To that end, I have chosen three such questions to see how they are answered in this book:

1. What role does God play in humanity's pursuit of knowledge?
2. Is the notion of knowledge a singular one, or is there a plurality in the forms of knowledge that human beings seek to acquire?[2]
3. Is there a moral value that is associated with knowledge? In other words, is there "undesirable" or "forbidden" knowledge?

Obviously, these questions are interrelated, and many aspects of the book address them in great measure.

Indisputably, Islam places a tremendous value on knowledge. There are several statements attributed to the Prophet Muhammad that place men of knowledge at the level of the heirs of the prophets. Indeed, the quest for knowledge is deemed *obligatory* for all Muslims, and we have been enjoined to seek knowledge "from the cradle to the grave." The Qur'an is equally unambiguous on the issue. Especially eloquent is the *ayah* in *Surat al-Zumar*: "Are those who know equal with those who know not? But only men of understanding will pay heed" (39:9).

The above verse is extraordinary because here the Qur'an is identifying knowledge as a marker of privilege. Given the egalitarian nature of Islam in every other sphere, this privilege granted to knowledge is unique. On the one hand, the religion constantly strives to equalize its followers with respect to birth, gender, race, and economic status. On the other hand, in matters of knowledge, it chooses to take a stand that may, for want of a better term, be considered elitist! Moreover, the way the verse describes knowledge is extremely secular. The Qur'an is not privileging *Islamic* knowledge over other forms of knowledge, but rather is referring to a secularized, universal form of knowledge. Thus, the pursuit of knowledge, of any kind, seems to be the currency that will privilege one human being over another.

At this juncture, one needs to take pause and ask what forms of knowledge are deemed privileged in Islam, and whether Islam considers certain forms of knowledge tainted. Many epistemological circles contend that knowledge cannot be viewed as a value-free category. For example, in the

past several years, postcolonial theorists have attempted to link various forms of oppression and colonial domination to the project of Western enlightenment itself. Ashish Nandy and others argue that if postcolonial subjects are to reclaim their political space in the world, they will first have to claim epistemological primacy for their local knowledges by decentering the Western notions of knowledge.[3] In effect, these theorists argue that knowledge is a value-laden construct and cannot be celebrated without context.

What do we mean, therefore, when we suggest that knowledge is a marker of privilege? For indeed, while we are commanded to plead with God to increase our knowledge, we are enjoined to act in a disciplined manner and follow the *sirat al-mustaqīm,* a righteous path that presumably precludes various forms of distractions. Indeed, Iblis, the most reviled of Allah's subjects, has often been cast as one of the most knowledgeable. How can one make a distinction between a quest for hitherto unknown knowledges and a serious transgression? Indeed, this is a profound epistemological question. After all, epistemology is the study of the *nature* of knowledge. A true Islamic epistemology should be one that helps us make these distinctions, if any, between "good" and "bad" knowledge.

Not only does the analysis of knowledge prove to be a daunting task to the Islamic philosophers, but the "rules" of philosophical engagement themselves are potential stumbling blocks. Indeed, the Islamic philosopher faces an unenviable predicament. On the one hand, philosophy enjoins us to ask certain tough questions, to wonder, and to speculate. On the other hand, Islamic law does not brook any doubt on certain fundamental questions such as that of the unitary existence of God (*tawhīd*). These two demands make Islamic philosophy quite a tightrope.

One way in which a philosopher can resolve this issue is to be transgressive, to disregard Islamic law in the pursuit of philosophy and hope that in the pursuit of knowledge, one will be reunited with the *sirat al-mustaqīm* at a later juncture; to consider a transgressive action as a detour from the straight path rather than an act of straying. That, I contend, is an inferior option. It is a slippery slope toward an irreligious relativism. Indeed, some of the biggest crises in other religions have come about because philosophers who made creative but transgressive moves into a space of irreligious philosophy found their foundations of truth and morality completely decoupled from their religion.[4]

The other option is to disown philosophy, or to decenter it.[5] Critics of philosophical inquiry in Islam have often contended that after all, if we have the guidance of the Qur'an, the Hadith, and the various elements of Islamic guidance, what is the point in resorting to personal speculative quests? In my opinion, however, such an attitude is as dangerous as the transgressive option, for it robs us of the very faculties that help us become and stay Muslim. Indeed, to deny the need for an Islamic epistemology is dangerously shortsighted. As Khan rightly points out, a philosophical underpinning of Islam is a necessary precursor to the Islamization of social sciences, a project that seems to be gaining currency among Muslim intellectuals.[6]

Thus, if philosophy and Islam have a potentially uneasy relationship, and if the answer to this potential unease does not lie in the denial of either tradition, how are we to find reconciliation between the two? I believe that this book by Allama Yazdi offers us some potential answers. Yazdi presents a template to consider our relationship with divine knowledge, and our relationship with God. He sets up an epistemological template for us to consider in evaluating the nature of knowledge. It is also an excellent introduction to the works of some of the luminaries of Islamic philosophy, such as Avicenna (Ibn Sina), Averroes (Ibn Rushd), al-Ghazali, Suhrawardy, and Mulla Sadra.

As the title of the book suggests, Yazdi considers the concept of "knowledge by presence" (*'ilm al-huḍūri*) to be a central issue in Islamic epistemology. The concept of knowledge by presence may be seen as an attempt to resolve the *relationship* between knowledge and its possessor. For example, if I say "I know that 2+2 equals 4," it is pretty evident that a) I exist, and b) I know I exist. The issue here is, What is the difference between "I exist" and "I know I exist"? According to the concept of knowledge by presence, there is *no* difference between these two conditions. In other words, the knowledge of my existence is very much a part of my existence and reaches me unmediated by any mental, psychological, or linguistic process.

The notion of knowledge by presence may be contrasted with the notion of knowledge by correspondence (*'ilm al-husūli*).[7] The most significant distinction between the two is that knowledge by correspondence promotes a duality between subject and object, which is also the basis of Western epistemology. On the other hand, knowledge by presence does not subscribe to this separation between the knower and the known. It also claims a com-

plete lack of separation and distance between the *existing* subject and the *knowing* subject and thus lays the ground for conceptualizing a new form of communication between human beings and God.

One of the most significant arguments of the book is an analysis of the role of *irfan*, the apprehension of the divine through mystical processes.[8] The notion of *irfan* follows from an ontological contention, that of the unity of all forms of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). Yazdi interprets this doctrine to imply that the world of reality is invariable and can only be apprehended through mystical means.

Yazdi makes a key distinction between a *transitive* object of knowledge and an *immanent* object.[9] In strictly lay terms, the transitive object is one whose reality is derived primarily through its being "known" by a subject. To that extent, it is really an artifact of knowledge by correspondence. On the other hand, knowledge by presence relies purely on the immanent object, an object whose existence is not subject to any perception. The existence of the immanent object as well as the act of knowing it, Yazdi suggests, is one and the same. As he puts it, "the analysis of the notion of knowledge logically implies that since the object is nothing but the immanent and essential, the meaning of the objectivity of this object is "*manifested in the very constitution of knowing*" (p. 40, emphasis added). Following from the above, he offers the following definition of knowledge by presence: "knowledge by presence is marked by being noetic and having an immanent object that makes it a self-object knowledge, adequate to the definition of knowledge as such, *with no need of a corresponding transitive object* additional to the immanent one" (p. 41, emphasis added).

To make the somewhat brutal point, "So what"? How does this construct of knowledge by presence or of the immanent object make any difference to our lives? In my opinion, the concept of knowledge by presence is a useful concept even for us lay people, for it helps us to use knowledge as a means to achieve closeness to God and to make some advances in our understanding of the divine.

Allama Yazdi expands on this theme by a series of brilliant examples. One of my personal favorites is his discussion on the famous Qur'anic Light Verse (25:35)[10] and Ibn Sina's commentary on the same. In expanding on the concept of the verse that begins by saying, "God is the light of the heavens and earth,"[11] Ibn Sina makes the following points:

- All knowledge is God's knowledge.

- Knowledge is revealed to us through a divine, active intellect.
- Intellect bestows light upon light (guidance upon guidance) on us.

In other words, God provides us with the building blocks of knowledge, but at the same time has created a system for us whereby we are assisted not only in the integration of that knowledge into our existing knowledge-stock, but also its potential deployment in this world.

Thus, if one reads this verse through the lens of knowledge by presence, the tension between philosophical inquiry and religious discipline disappears, or is resolved. The knowing subject is one whose primary task is to make judgments between competing knowledge claims. God's offer of bestowing "guidance upon guidance" (*nūrun 'alā nūr*) to us is a constant offer, from the beginning of time until the Day of Judgment. Now, how we use these lights and these guidances to illuminate our world is indeed our own responsibility and a function of our mental maps, our comprehension, our intellect, and our existing corpus of knowledge. Thus, one may conclude that knowledge itself is never inherently forbidden or "bad." It is only when knowledge enters a political/institutional framework that its deployment becomes a greater moral question.[12]

To the extent that this book attempts to validate and to formalize the mystical traditions of Islam, it is a triumph. Indeed, it brings some unheard, dimmed voices of Islamic philosophy squarely into the center of existing philosophical conversations and offers several counterpoints to existing philosophical shibboleths. It acknowledges the multiplicity of Islamic epistemological traditions and may become an important foundational work in the ongoing attempts to recraft social sciences from an Islamic perspective. As human beings, we are increasingly being interlinked through various processes of globalization. However, far before that, the human race was interlinked through the creative endeavors of God.[13] In this quantity-related world, it is important to make one's philosophies understandable to a larger audience, which this book accomplishes.

The book is not without its faults, of course. For one, it casts itself (or rather, it has been cast through the publishing process) as a dialogue between "Islamic" and "Western" philosophy. Indeed, the Islam-West dialectic or binary is a troubling one, since in so establishing, we are in danger of abdicating many wonderful concepts to the Western (and by implication, non-Islamic) realm. Such a distinction then effaces an entire histo-

ry of Islamic and Western ideas that developed parallel to each other, those that developed through a process of mutual interaction, and those that developed through imitation. Indeed, reviewers of the book in traditional Western journals have tended to misunderstand the importance of this book precisely on the basis of this binary.[14] They have been more concerned with pointing out how traces of knowledge by presence are present in Western philosophical traditions as well. In my opinion, it would have been far better to concede this point and move on to the more important discussions in the book. As of now, it appears that the Western critics were a bit too keen to throw the baby out with the bath water.

In a related oversight, the book persists in making a distinction between ontology and epistemology. This separation between reality and knowledge is a peculiarly Western binary, and I believe that by following this distinction, the book abdicates its frames of reference to a Western template. (This, despite the fact that on the very first page, Yazdi emphatically states that "the word knowing does not mean anything other than being.") Indeed, the binary division between knowledge by presence and knowledge by correspondence is an equally overstated distinction, which elides the areas where the two concepts may coexist and complement each another.

However, on the whole, the book remains extraordinary and delightful. It is unique in several respects, as Hossein Nasr's generous introduction makes clear. On one hand, it makes points toward the *living* traditions of Islamic philosophy. Islamic philosophy has not been stagnant for the past 1,400 years. Indeed, it has constantly been nurtured and strengthened. The book makes several of these aspects clear. And in its lucid expositions of the works of eminent Islamic philosophers, it is a rigorous primer. Finally, to the extent that it strengthens the mystical traditions of Islam, it argues for the reinstatement of an extraordinary Islamic tradition to the status of a legitimate philosophy.

Notes

1. Indeed, the Qur'anic browser that I used identified 145 verses of the Qur'an that explicitly deal with the issue of knowledge.
2. In my hometown of Hyderabad, India, there is an old and famous college named Anwarul Uloom (the Lights of Knowledge). I often remember wondering whether this was an appropriate name for an institution with Islamic credentials, as opposed to a more singular Noorul Ilm (the Light of Knowledge)?
3. Ashish Nandy (ed.), *Science, Hegemony and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
4. Nietzsche's now historic contention that "God is dead" is a case in point. For a lucid analysis of the application of Nietzchean ideas to a relationship between Islam and the

West, see M. Khan, "The Ethic of Resentment: A Nietzschean Analysis of Islam and the West," *Middle East Affairs* 5, nos. 1–2 (1999): 161–173.

5. Al-Ghazali's *Tahafatul al-falsafah* is a good case in point. Al-Ghazali was critical of philosophers who engaged in long debates over metaphysical issues, rather than concentrating on logic.

6. M.A.M. Khan, "The Need to Revive Islamic Philosophy," *Intellectual Discourse* 6, no. 1 (1998): 1–9. Here, Khan suggests that the creation of an Islamic philosophy is the foundation of the intellectual "decolonization" of the Muslim world, and must necessarily precede more applied efforts such as the Islamization of Knowledge projects.

7. This distinction may be attributed to Suhrawardy, the founder of the School of Illumination, or Ishraq. (See Nasr's preface to the book, p. xii.)

8. This concept is analyzed in light of the works of Ibn al-Arabi (see pp. 22–23 of the book).

9. This is the subject of chapter 2 of the book.

10. This is discussed in pp. 14–16 of the book, and in a series of footnotes on pp. 193–94.

11. In this wonderfully metaphysical verse, a variety of metaphors are used to describe the processes by which God has offered knowledge to His subjects and how they may receive these fruits of knowledge and enrich their being. Pickthall's translation goes thus: "God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as it were a shining star. (This lamp is) kindled from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil would almost glow forth (of itself) though no fire touched it. Light upon light. God guideth unto His light whom He will. And God speaketh to mankind in allegories, for God is Knower of all things."

12. As Hazrat Ali has remarked in *Nahjul Balagha*, it is that knowledge which is not acted upon, or acted upon in evil, which is the source of abomination.

13. "But His command, when He intendeth a thing, is only that He saith unto it: Be! and it is" (36:82).

14. See for example, the review by David B. Burrell in *Journal of Religion* 74: 141–42, which is quite critical of the book, and suggests that the reviewer does not agree that knowledge by presence is a non-Western construct; or Ian Netton's more favorable review in *Religious Studies* 29: 270–71. Both reviewers agree that the book's analysis of the work of earlier Islamic philosophers is valuable.