

Lesson 11: Introduction to Epistemology

The Importance of Epistemology

There is a series of fundamental problems that confront man as a conscious being whose activities spring from his consciousness; and if man becomes negligent and remiss in his efforts to find correct answers to these problems, he will find instead that he has crossed the boundary between humanity and bestiality.

Remaining in doubt and hesitation, in addition to the inability to satisfy his truth-seeking conscience, it will not enable man to dispel anxieties about his likely responsibilities. He will be left to languish or, as occasionally happens, turn into a dangerous creature. Since mistaken and deviant solutions such as materialism and nihilism, cannot provide psychological comfort or social well-being. One should look for the fundamental cause of individual and social corruption in aberrant views and thoughts.

Hence, there is no alternative but to seek answers to these problems with firm and unflagging resolution. We may spare no effort until we establish a basis for our own human lives and in this way assist others as well, and arrest the influence in society of incorrect thoughts and the deviant teachings which are current.

Now that the necessity of an intellectual and philosophical endeavor has become clear and no room has been left for doubt or uncertainty or hesitancy, it remains for us to take the first step in the mandatory and unavoidable journey upon which we have resolved by facing up to the following question: Is the human intellect able to solve these problems?

This query forms the nucleus about which the problems of epistemology are centered. Until we solve the problems of this branch of philosophy, we will neither be able to be arriving at solutions to the problems of ontology nor to those of the other branches of philosophy. Until the value of intellectual knowledge is determined, claims presented as actual solutions to such problems will be pointless and unacceptable. There will always remain such questions concerning how the intellect can provide a correct solution to these problems.

It is here that many of the well-known figures of Western philosophy, such as Hume, Kant , Auguste Comte , and all of the positivists have blundered. With their incorrect views they have mislaid the cultural foundations of Western societies, and even the scholars of other sciences, especially the behaviorists among psychologists, have been misled by them.

Unfortunately, the battering and ruinous waves of such teachings also have spread to other parts of the world, and apart from the lofty summits and unimpregnable cliffs that rest on the stable and firm grounds of divine philosophy, all else more or less has come under their influence.

Therefore, we must endeavor to take the first steady step by laying the foundations of our house of philosophical ideas solidly and sturdily until, with the help of Almighty God, we are worthy to tread through other stages and arrive at our desired goal.

A Brief Overview of the History of Epistemology

Although epistemology as a branch of philosophy does not have a long history as a separate science, it may be said that the problem of the value of knowledge, which forms its central axis, has been somehow raised since the most ancient periods of philosophy. Perhaps the attention of thinkers was first drawn to this problem by the discovery of the flaws and defects in the disclosure of external events by the sense organs. This very matter prompted the Eleatics to distrust sensory perception and to rely more heavily on rational knowledge.

On the other hand, differences among thinkers pertaining to rational problems and the contradictory proofs set forth by each group to substantiate and corroborate their own ideas and views provided the Sophists with the opportunity to deny the value of rational knowledge. They go so far in this way as basically to doubt and even to deny external realities.

After that, the problem of knowledge was not raised seriously until Aristotle compiled the principles of logic as standards for correct thinking and for evaluating proofs. After twenty some odd centuries, these principles are still useful. Even the Marxists, after battling for years against it, have finally accepted the human need for a part of this logic.

After the centuries during which Greek philosophy flourished, oscillations appeared in the evaluation of sensory and rational knowledge. There were two other occasions when Europe was faced with the crisis of skepticism. After the period of the Renaissance and the development of the empirical sciences, empiricism gradually came to prevail.

At the present empiricism is still the dominant school of thought, although in the midst of this prominent rationalists do appear from time to time. Virtually the first systematic investigations in epistemology were performed by Leibniz on the continent of Europe, and in England by John Locke.

In this way an independent branch of philosophy took shape. Locke's investigations were followed by

those of his successors, Berkeley and Hume. Their philosophy of empiricism won fame and gradually the position of the rationalists was weakened to such an extent that Kant, a rationalist, was actually very deeply influenced by the ideas of Hume.

Kant declared the evaluation of knowledge and the ability of reason to be one of the most important duties of philosophy. However, he only accepted the value of the conclusions of theoretical reason within the limits of the empirical sciences, mathematics, and areas subordinate to them. The first blow from among the rationalists was struck against metaphysics, although earlier Hume, a prominent figure amongst the empiricists, had begun a severe attack which would later be followed in a more serious form by the positivists.

In this way the precise influence of epistemology in the other fields of philosophy and the reasons underlying the decline of Western philosophy come to light.

Knowledge in Islamic Philosophy

In contrast to the oscillations and crises that developed for Western philosophy, especially in the field of epistemology, such that after the passage of the twenty-five centuries of its lifetime it not only has not acquired a firm and sturdy foundation, but rather it can be said that its support has become ever more unsteady, Islamic philosophy, to the contrary, has continually retained its strength and stability, and has never become the victim of shakiness, upheaval or crisis.

Despite some contrary tendencies which have occasionally posed a challenge for Islamic philosophers, they have maintained their doctrine that the intellect is fundamental for the solution of metaphysical problems. Without underestimating the importance of the experience of the senses or denying that of the experimental method in the natural sciences, they have persisted in the application of the rational method to philosophical problems.

Confrontation with those of opposing views and wrestling with critics, far from making Islamic philosophers weak, has only served to strengthen and increase their abilities. For this reason, the tree of Islamic philosophy has flourished and become more fruitful daily, and has even become resistant and immune to the attacks of its enemies. It is now completely capable of defending its rightful positions and defeating its competitors.

The trends that have more or less been opposed to philosophy have had two main sources. From one quarter there are those who have considered some current philosophical views to conflict with literal interpretations of Scripture and Tradition (Sunnah), and fearing that the propagation of philosophy would weaken religious belief among the people, have opposed such views.

On the other hand, the 'uraфа (gnostics) have emphasized the importance of the spiritual way, and have feared that philosophical tendencies would lead to the neglect of the path of gnosis and lack of progress

on the way of the heart. Hence, they ignored it, claiming that rationalists had wooden feet.^{[1](#)}

One must realize that a true religion like the manifest religion of Islam will never be threatened by the thoughts of the philosophers. Despite whatever shortcomings or deviations they may have, with philosophical development and maturity and after passage from a raw and naive phase, the verities of Islam will come to the fore and its truth will become ever more manifest. Philosophy turns out to be a worthy and an irreplaceable servant [of Islam] on the one hand by explaining its lofty teachings, and on the other hand by defending it from perverse and hostile schools of thought, as it has done and shall continue to do in an ever improved manner, God willing.

Spiritual and gnostic wayfaring is by no means in conflict with divine philosophy; rather it has been assisted [by such philosophy] and has also profited from it. It must be admitted that on the whole this sort of conflict has been useful for preventing one-sidedness and extremism, and for demarcating the bounds of each of them.

Because of the sturdy, steadfast and unshakable position of the intellect in Islamic philosophy, no need has arisen for a detailed examination of the problems of knowledge in a methodical and systematic form as an independent branch of philosophy.

Merely a few scattered issues pertaining to knowledge, addressed in various chapters of logic and philosophy, have sufficed, for example, in one section pertaining to the teachings of the Sophists where their invalidity is pointed out, and in another section where the divisions of the sciences and their principles are explained. Even the problem of mental existence, which is one of the topics germane to the problems of knowledge, was not advanced as an independent topic until Ibn Sina. Even after that, all angles and sides of the issue have not been comprehensively examined and researched.

Now, considering the current conditions, when Western thought has almost penetrated our cultural environs raising questions about many of the axioms of divine philosophy, philosophical questions can no longer be limited to their former framework, and the discussion can no longer be carried on in the traditional manner.

Since this manner has not only prevented the development of philosophy through interchange with other schools of thought, but also has made our intellectuals, who inevitably have become and will continue to become familiar with Western thought, pessimistic about Islamic philosophy, bringing about the illusion that Islamic philosophy has lost its effectiveness and is unable to compete with other philosophical schools. Hence, day by day, their tendency toward foreign culture increases, with disastrous results. This situation could be seen during the previous regime in our universities.

To repay our debt to the Islamic Revolution and the sacred blood which has been shed for it, and to fulfill our divine responsibility we should increase our efforts to explain the foundations of philosophy and propagate them in such a way that they may answer the doubts posed by the perverted and atheistic schools of thought, and we should support the current needs for belief and make it available to young

seekers of truth and investigators, so that the education of Islamic philosophy can spread, and so Islamic culture may be insured against the encroachments of alien ideas.

The Definition of Epistemology

Before we begin to define epistemology (shinakht shinasi) it is necessary to comment on the word shinakht (knowledge).² This word, which is equivalent to ma'rifah in Arabic, has various usages. Its most general meaning is knowledge in general, awareness and information. Sometimes it is used for particular perception, and sometimes for recognition. Sometimes it is employed for science which corresponds to reality with certainty. There are some debates in philology and etymology about the foreign synonyms which need not be mentioned here.

Knowledge as the subject of the science of epistemology may be understood as having any of these meanings or any other. In fact, it is based on convention. But since the goal of surveying epistemological problems is not particular to any specific kind of knowledge, it is better to use that general meaning which is equivalent to knowledge in a general sense.

The concept of knowledge is one of the clearest and most self-evident concepts, so that it not only is in need of no definition, but its definition is impossible, since there are no more obvious terms by which to define it.

The phrases and statements which are used in philosophical and logical books as definitions of knowledge and science are not genuine definitions. The purpose of mentioning them is to specify its instances in some specific science or field of study. For example, logicians define knowledge as "the obtaining of the form of something in the mind," and the purpose of this definition is to specify their intended instance which is "acquired knowledge".

Or it refers to the view concerning certain problems of ontology of some philosophers who define knowledge as "the presence of a non-material being to another non-material being," or "the presence of a thing to a non-material existent." The purpose of these definitions is to state their view about the non-material nature of knowledge and the knowing subject.

If we are to explain knowledge, it is better to say that it is the presence of the thing itself or its particular form or its general concept in a non-material existent. In addition, we should say that it is not necessary for knowledge that the knower always should be other than the object known. It is possible, as in the case of awareness of one's own self, that there be no difference between the knower and the object of knowledge.

In fact in such cases unity is the most perfect instance of presence. By the definition we have presented of the word knowledge we may define epistemology as 'the science which discusses human knowledge and the evaluation of its types and the criteria of their validity.

1. The way of the rationalists, according to the sufis, such as Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273), is artificial, like that of one who would walk with crutches, or like that of the blind man who walks with a cane. See the Mathnavi, Bk. 1, 2128. (Tr.)

2. The Farsi word used for epistemology in this text is shinakht–shinasi, both halves of which are derived from the verb shinakhtan, which means ‘to know’ in the sense of being acquainted with, as in the German kennen, as opposed to wissen. Today, the term ma’rifat shinasi has gained wider currency in Iran. (Tr.)

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