

Lesson 13: The Knowledge of God

Knowledge is one of the attributes of beauty and perfection, and there is no doubt at all that this attribute is confirmed for God. Muslim philosophers and theologians (nay, all theists) have a consensus of opinions on this issue, although there is a difference of views and opinions on the quality and limits of the knowledge of God.

The knowledge of God can be discussed in three levels, viz.

- (1) God's knowledge of His Essence,
- (2) God's knowledge of the creatures prior to their creation (knowledge about the things in the realm of essence, or essential knowledge), and
- (3) God's knowledge of the creatures after their being created (knowledge about the things in the realm of action, or active knowledge).

1. God's Knowledge of His Essence

God's knowledge of His Essence is an intuitive knowledge or knowledge by presence (*'ilm-e ‎‎*); so is the human being's knowledge of himself. Basically, knowledge means the presence of the known (*ma'lūm*) before the knower (*'ālim*).

If the creature is devoid of corporeality, the reality of that creature is undoubtedly present to himself, for that which hinders the presence of such a thing to himself is its corporeality and changeability, and since God is free from corporeality and changeability, His Essence is present in Himself and He has knowledge of His Essence.

2. God's Essential Knowledge of the Creatures

As to the nature of God's Essential knowledge of the creatures, different views have been transmitted. These views are related to three issues. One is whether God's Essential and prior knowledge of the

creatures is intuitive (ʿuqūḍ) or acquired (ʿuḍūḍ). Another [issue] is whether God's prior knowledge of the things is general (ijmāl) or detailed (tafṣīl). And the third [issue] is whether God's prior knowledge pertains to the existence (wujūd) or the quiddity (maḥiyyah) of things.

2.1. Shaykh al-Ishrāq's View

God's prior knowledge of the creatures is intuitive (ʿuqūḍ) and general (ijmāl) and pertains to their existence (wujūd). This view has been adopted by Shaykh al-Ishrāq¹ and his followers. According to this view, since God is knowledgeable of His Essence, and on the other hand, the Essence of God is the Cause behind the coming into existence of the creatures and knowledge of the Cause leads to the knowledge of the effect in general, it follows that God is essentially knowledgeable of all the things in the universe and His knowledge is intuitive and general.

The problem with this view is that detailed knowledge is superior to general knowledge. In this case, based on the said view, God's Essential knowledge of the creatures cannot be the most perfect knowledge. This is so while the Essence of God possesses all perfections in the highest degree possible:

﴿وَلِلَّهِ الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَى﴾

"To Allah belong the Best Names."²

2.2. Mu'tazilah View

God's prior knowledge of the creatures is acquired (ʿuḍūḍ) and detailed (tafṣīl) and pertains to their quiddity, because prior to being created, their quiddity possesses a sort of subsistence (thubūt) ($\text{maḥiyyat-e ma'damah}$ or non-existential quiddities) and subsistence includes existence (wujūd). This view has been ascribed to the Mu'tazilah who subscribe to the notion of pre-eternity subsistents ($\text{thabit-e azaliyyah}$).

In addition to the fact that as will be proved later, there is no place for acquired knowledge in God, the problem with this view is that subsistence (thubūt) is equal to existence (wujūd) and anything which does not exist has no objective subsistence. Therefore, belief in the pre-eternity subsistents is basically incorrect.

2.3. Ibn Sīnā's View

God's prior knowledge of the creatures is a detailed and acquired knowledge which pertains to the mental existence of the quiddities. For instance, when a person wants to do certain things, prior to their realization, he has detailed knowledge of them and this knowledge pertains to the mental existence of the quiddities of his actions. Ibn Sīnā and his followers have adopted this view.

The problem with this view is that acquired knowledge is related to the creatures which are in contact with matter in their essences or actions. By means of their faculties of sensory perception, they develop perception of the corporeal beings and present in themselves the quiddities of those beings and have knowledge of them. And through those mental quiddities, they also become knowledgeable of the actual existence of the things.³ And since God is immune from corporeality in terms of both Essence and Action, acquired knowledge has no place in him. God's knowledge of His Essence or His Actions is an intuitive knowledge.

2.4. ʿAdr al-Muta'allih's View

God's prior knowledge of the creatures is an intuitive knowledge and as to whether it is general or detailed, it is general as well as detailed, because in Essence, God is straightforwardly entitled to the existential perfections of all the creatures. Since existence is a single reality and has different levels, the highest level of existence is no other than God's Being. It is evident that every perfect [being] has deficient existential levels in addition to a level of perfection which has no deficiency.

Due to the fact, therefore, that God is not devoid of any of the levels of existential perfection, He automatically and solely possesses all the existential perfections which diversely and pluralistically exist in the creatures. From this perspective, therefore, God's Essential knowledge of the creatures is a general (*ijmʿ*) knowledge (*ijm* in the sense of simplicity and oneness in contrast to *taʿ* in the sense of multiplicity and plurality).

Meanwhile, after the coming into existence of the things, nothing shall be added to the knowledge of God, because no change takes place in the Divine Essence. From this perspective, God's eternal knowledge of the creatures is general as well as detailed.

If we assume that a person is knowledgeable of all the issues within a field of science in the sense that he has mastery of that field in that he has prior knowledge and answer to any question within that field and that the answers he gives do not add anything to his knowledge, in this case the existence of multiplicity with respect to the answers he gives does not cause any change in his knowledge. He has knowledge of all the issues before and after giving his answers.

That which changes is the existence of answers which have general existence (simple and identical) in the essence of the knower, while having detailed existence (multiple and diverse) in his action. Yet, no change has found its way in the essence of the knower and his knowledge. Once it occurs that such an assumption is possible in the case of the human being, why is it not acceptable with respect to God who is the Necessary Being in essence?

This view has been put forth by ʿAdr al-Muta'allih and accepted by all followers of the Transcendental School of Philosophy (*ʿikmat al-mutaʿliyah*), and it is the best interpretation ever presented to explain God's eternal knowledge of the creatures. Traditions (*ahādith*) also confirm this view. For instance, it is

thus stated in some traditions:

عِلْمُهُ بِهِ قَبْلَ كَوْنِهِ كَعِلْمِهِ بِهِ بَعْدَ كَوْنِهِ.

“His knowledge of it prior to its existence is like His knowledge of it after its existence.”⁴

Ayyūb ibn Nafī asked Imām al-Ḥaddād (‘a) in a letter, thus: “Was God knowledgeable of the creatures prior to their creation, or not?”

The Imām (‘a) thus wrote in reply to him: “God was knowledgeable of the creatures before creating them, just as He has knowledge of them after their creation.”⁵

As such, God’s knowledge of the creatures in the realm of essence prior to their creation necessitates God’s knowledge of His Essence, just as the existence of the creatures depends on the existence of the Divine Essence:⁶

فَكَانَ عِلْمُهُ بِجَمِيعِ مَا عَدَاهُ لَازِمًا لِعِلْمِهِ لِدَاتِهِ، كَمَا أَنَّ وُجُودَ مَا عَدَاهُ تَابِعٌ لُؤُجُودِ ذَاتِهِ

God’s Present Knowledge of the Creatures in the Present

God’s knowledge of the creatures after creating them – or, God’s knowledge of the creatures in the realm of action – is a detailed intuitive knowledge, but it is not identical with God’s Essence because the assumption is that this knowledge is in the realm of action and action is outside the essence. Here, the reality of the creatures is that they are God’s action and His knowledge as well.

As an analogy, it can be likened to the human being’s knowledge of the mental forms he creates. The reality of these forms is also his action as well as his knowledge. That is, the said mental forms by themselves are present in him, and at the same time, they are his action and effect. Interpreting God’s present knowledge of the creatures in this way is one of the initiatives of Shaykh al-Ishrāq. On this basis, there is no difference between the immaterial and material beings, for all of them are an effect and action of God, and their reality is the link itself to the Divine Being, and they are all in the presence of God.⁷

The Divine Proofs

From the explanation of the three levels of God’s knowledge, the proofs of God’s knowledge can also be inferred. The proof of God’s knowledge of His Essence is indeed the immunity of the Sacred Divine Essence from materiality and physical properties. Since the immaterial being is the very presence (ḥudūr), whenever that Being is self-existent and does not depend on other beings, His existence is present for Himself. The reality of knowledge is also nothing except presence (ḥudūr) and exposure

(*inkish*).

The proof of God's knowledge of the creatures in the realm of essence (prior to their creation) is that the Essence of God is the Cause of the creatures and He has knowledge also of His Essence. Therefore, He has knowledge of the creatures and knowledge of the cause necessitates knowledge of the effect; hence, God has knowledge of the creatures.

Moreover, the creatures are actions of God, the Exalted, and at the same time, they have rules and stability, order and harmony, and once an action has such characteristics, it is a proof of its agent's knowledge and awareness. The rules and stability of the universe, therefore, is a proof of God's prior knowledge of it [and its components].

The proof of God's knowledge of the creatures in the realm of action (knowledge after creating them) is that the creatures are actions and effects of God, and the essence of action is nothing but the link and attachment to the essence of its agent (*fai'l*), and as a result, it is present before its agent and cause. The reality of the universe, therefore, is present before God and He has intuitive knowledge of it.

In his *Tajrid al-I'tiqad*, Mu'aqqiq al-¹⁰ has expressed the said argument in these words:

الأحكام والتجرد، واستناد كل شيء إليه دلائل العلم.

That is to say that the laws and stability of the universe, the immateriality of the Divine Essence and emanation of the existence of all beings from God are proofs of God's knowledge [of His Essence and the creatures].⁸

The All-hearing, the All-seeing and the Perceiver

In many verses of the Qur'an, God is described as the All-hearing (*al-sam*) and the All-seeing (*al-ba*).⁹ These descriptions have also been mentioned in the traditions as God's Attributes of Beauty. There are two views concerning the meaning of *al-sam* and *al-ba*. One is that they refer to God's knowledge of audible and visible things, and the other is that they are separate Attributes.¹⁰

The first view which is adopted by the philosophers and erudite theologians is acceptable. And perhaps the reason why *al-sam* and *al-ba* have been specifically mentioned in the Qur'an and traditions is that these two faculties of sensory perception have more prominent role in the knowledge of human being and he who usually expresses his knowledge by seeing and hearing. For this reason, once it is said that God is All-seeing and All-hearing, one can imagine better the all-pervasive knowledge of God in relation to himself and his actions, and as a result, this will contribute much in his further training.

The attribute of *idr* (apprehension) or *al-mudrik* (the Perceiver) has not been mentioned in verses of the Qur'an as an Attribute of God, but in view of the holy verse, "Yet He apprehends the sights,"¹¹ which

ascribes the action of apprehension to God, [12](#) theologians have abstracted from it the attribute *al-mudrik*. There is also a difference of opinions on the meaning of *idrāk*. Some have considered it an attribute distinct from *‘ilm* (knowledge) while others have interpreted it to mean knowledge of the details. And the latter opinion is acceptable. [13](#)

Review Questions

1. Write down the three levels of God’s knowledge.
2. Is God’s knowledge of His Essence intuitive (*‘udrī*) or acquired (*‘uqrī*)? Why?
3. Write down the view of Shaykh al-Ishrāq about God’s prior knowledge along with the criticism to it.
4. Write down the view attributed to the Mu‘tazilah about God’s prior knowledge along with the criticism to it.
5. What is Ibn Sīnā’s view about God’s prior knowledge? And what is the problem with it?
6. Write down ‘Adr al-Muta’allih’s view about God’s prior knowledge.
7. Explain God’s eternal knowledge of the creatures by citing a tradition (*‘adith*).
8. What type of knowledge is God’s knowledge of the creatures after creating them?
9. Write down two proofs of God’s knowledge.
10. What is the meaning of God’s being the All-hearing (*al-samī‘*) and the All-seeing (*al-baṣīr*)?

[1.](#) Shaykh al-Ishraq refers to Shahb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī (b. 1155), a towering figure of the Illuminationist (ishrāqī) School of Islamic Philosophy. [Trans.]

[2.](#) Sīrat al-A‘raf 7:180.

[3.](#) Refer to the discussion on knowledge, knower and known in the books of philosophy.

[4.](#) Uṣūl al-Kifī, vol. 1, “Kitāb al-Tawḥīd,” section (bāb) on the Attributes of the Essence, ‘adith 2.

[5.](#) Ibid., ‘adith 4.

[6.](#) ‘Adr al-Muta’allih, Al-Asfār al-Arba‘ah, vol. 6, p. 179. For further information in this regard, see ‘Alī Rabbī Gulpāyghānī, Ayṭīn al-‘ikmah, vol. 2, pp. 544–547.

[7.](#) ‘Adr al-Muta’allih and ‘Allamah al-Ḥabībī have made a distinction between immaterial and material beings. Accordingly, the presence of the immaterial beings is by themselves without any medium while the presence of the material beings is through the medium of the presence of their immaterial forms in the immaterial world. That which is stated in the text is the pertinent viewpoint of Fakhr al-Sabziwārī which seems to be stronger. See Ayṭīn al-‘ikmah, vol. 2, pp. 547–548.

[8.](#) Kashf al-Murād, station (maq‘ad) 3, chap. 2, issue 2.

[9.](#) The descriptions al-samī‘ and al-baṣīr as Attributes of God have been mentioned 41 and 42 times, respectively, in the Qur’an.

[10.](#) Qaw‘id al-Murād, p. 90.

[11.](#) Sīrat al-An‘ām 6:103.

[12.](#) Fīṭil Miqdād, Irshād al-Ḥalībī, pp. 206–207.

[13.](#) Ibid.

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