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Empiricism And The Philosophy Of Islam

One of the most important topics of debate among Muslim intellectuals and scholars today is about the scope of Islam. All Muslims affirm that Islam is a complete way of life, and God Himself has revealed in the Qur'an:

"On this day I have perfected for you your religion and I have completed my blessing for you, and I have chosen for you al-Islam as a religion..." (5:3).

But does this mean that Islam contains orders pertaining to all the arts and sciences, for example, regarding how to conduct research in mechanical engineering and economics, or must Islam confine itself to prescriptions for how to perform prayers, write a will, etc., with the understanding that these matters of ritual observance are sufficient for an entire life? Not only the learned, but the masses of Muslims are also concerned with this sort of question, for the ordinary Muslim wants to know how to submit to the will of Allah in all the aspects of his life.

We expect our religious scholars to tell us whether Islam forbids contraception, the recreational use of drugs, lotteries, and a host of other items about which there is controversy, and the scholars of Islam answer our questions by formulating rulings based on the Qur'an and authoritative narrations, but there are also broader questions about the scope of Islamic thought: Is there any such thing as Islamic economics? What about Islamic sociology, astrophysics, microbiology?

Within the intellectual history of the Muslims, there have been traditions of study of various fields such as mathematics, astronomy and philosophy, and often these traditions are called Islamic mathematics, Islamic astronomy, and Islamic philosophy, respectively. The question then arises as to whether these traditions have a normative or prescriptive value.

It is fairly clear that it would be a mistake to think that Islam contains rules for how to think about the stars and planets and that these rules are systematized in Islamic astronomy, but when we turn from astronomy to philosophy, the situation becomes a bit more confusing because Islamic philosophy has been developed at least in part as an attempt to provide a religiously satisfactory approach to the problems of philosophy.

And even with regard to Islamic astronomy, the Islamic dimension is arguably deeper than the fact that Muslims developed it, for it formed a part of a coherent intellectual perspective that was integrated with various other elements of Islamic thought and science.

The sorts of questions mentioned above pertaining to the scope of Islam and its implications for the sciences and humanities, and particularly for philosophy, may be said to comprise the subject matter of the philosophy of Islam. The philosophy of Islam is clearly distinct from Islamic philosophy, for while the latter term is used for the tradition of philosophy developed by such Muslim thinkers as Ibn Sina, Sohravardi and Sadr al–Muta'allihin, the philosophy of Islam is the study of the philosophical scope and implications of the religion of Islam.

The philosophy of Islam is also distinct from 'ilm al-kalam, which consists of the systematization of Islamic doctrine and its rational defense. The philosophy of Islam is concerned not with doctrine and its defense but with drawing out the philosophical ramifications of doctrine and their limits.

It may be useful to compare the philosophy of Islam with the philosophy of physics and the philosophy of religion. The philosophy of physics is the study of the philosophical problems fundamental to physics, problems related to physical theories, but for which solutions cannot be directly obtained from experimental evidence, as with various problems pertaining to the nature of time, space and motion.

Often a philosophical viewpoint seems to be presupposed in a given physical theory, and the philosophy of physics concerns itself with the elucidation of such views and their philosophical evaluation. When we turn to Islam, we find that some of the philosophical problems fundamental to it, such as the existence and attributes of God, are shared by Judaism and Christianity.

These problems are thus allocated to the philosophy of religion. What remains for the philosophy of Islam are such questions as what sort of philosophical psychology can best account for the Qur'anic revelation, the implications of the doctrine of wilayah for political philosophy, and more generally, what sorts of views are consistent with, most appropriate for, or implied by Islamic teachings.

Furthermore, since Islamic teachings themselves have been interpreted and expounded in a variety of ways by *mutakalimin*, *Hukama'* and *'urafa*, all of these questions about the philosophical ramifications of Islamic teachings may be repeated with qualifications indicative of a more particular interpretation.

So, for example, one may ask about which philosophical theory of religious experience is most appropriate to the relevant discussions in Ibn 'Arabi, or what sort of epistemological theory can best account for the discussions of doubt and certainty found in the works of uwul al-figh.

The philosophy of Islam may thus be seen as a broad field of philosophical research pertaining to the guidance which Allah has provided for mankind through His religion: "Inna al-dln 'inda Allah al-Islam". ["Verily, the religion of Allah is Islam."(3:19).]

A good example of the kind of study to be included in the philosophy of Islam is an inquiry into the relation between Islam and empiricism. Is Islam inconsistent with empiricism? Is there some form of empiricism that is demanded by Islam? Is Islam more compatible with rationalist than empiricist philosophies?

An examination of such questions is not only useful for embarking on study of the philosophy of Islam, but it is worthwhile because empiricist philosophies have had such influence on modern and contemporary Western thought that a proper grasp of the relations between Islam and empiricism is essential for an understanding of the scope of Islam and its philosophical relations to Western sciences and humanities. But before one can engage in such an inquiry it must be known just what empiricism is.

After the Renaissance, when European thought was seeking to escape the structures and strictures of scholasticism, two prominent modes of philosophical thought began to take shape: rationalism and empiricism.

Both the rationalists and the empiricists actively sought to formulate alternatives to the Aristotelian features of medieval philosophy. Both the rationalists and the empiricists attacked the Aristotelian understanding of reasoning and science. The rationalists did this by proposing to limit the notion of rationality to its more calculative aspects and by restricting the self–evident to the most subjective certainties.

The empiricists, on the other hand, were less interested in reason as such and emphasized the role of sensory experience in the acquisition of knowledge. The leaders of rationalism in modern European philosophy were all natives of the European continent: France, the Netherlands and Germany were the homes of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz during a period which spanned the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The most famous of the modern empiricists were all eighteenth century British philosophers: Locke, Berkeley and Hume, although precedents can be found for empiricist thought in Britain extending as far back as Roger Bacon and William of Ockham.

Among more recent philosophers, empiricism continues to exert a strong influence, so that William James referred to his version of pragmatism as "radical empiricism", and Rudolf Carnap, after giving up on Logical Positivism, called his philosophy "Logical Empiricism".

What all the various forms of empiricism have in common is an emphasis on the importance of experience for human knowledge and a tendency to doubt that which cannot be established on the basis of the evidence of the senses.

Empiricist philosophies come in all shapes and sizes, religious as well as atheistic, extreme and moderate. An extreme form of empiricism which is also religious was espoused by the Bishop Berkeley who denied the existence of a physical reality beyond the sensory appearances with which we are

directly acquainted.

Another extreme form of empiricism has been more recently advocated by Bas van Fraassen who believes in the existence of physical objects such as tables and chairs which can be seen with the naked eye, but who denies the existence of such things postulated by modern physics as electrons and photons of which we have no direct experience. 1

In one form or another, empiricism has had a tremendous influence on the development of the sciences in the West. No history of the sciences from physics and biology to psychology and economics would be complete without mention of the influence of empiricist thought on the advancement of these subjects.

The influence of empiricism is not limited to the sciences, however, but also extends to ethics and politics. Empiricists have tended to analyze the good in terms of the satisfaction of desires and practical reason in terms of efficiency in obtaining the good so defined.

In politics they have inclined toward social contract theories or utilitarianism, analyzing justice as that which accords with the rational agreement of members of a society in pursuit of the maximal satisfaction of their desires, or as the maximal satisfaction of the desires of the greatest number of people.

Empiricism, however, is fundamentally neither an ethical nor a political philosophy, but rather is often described as founded on two basic principles: first that all ideas are derived from experience, and second, that proper judgment must be supported by experience. Locke, as well as Berkeley and Hume, held that we have two kinds of experience: sensation, or external experience, and reflection, or internal experience.

These two kinds of experience were held to provide the foundations of all knowledge. Knowledge of necessary truths, such as the truths of logic and mathematics, were held to derive from inner experience of the relations among ideas, while empirical knowledge of contingent truths was held to derive from the outer experience of the senses of vision, hearing, smell, taste and touch.

What then does Islam have to say about empiricism? There are two commonly given answers to this sort of question which are as superficial as they are extreme. The first answer is that Islam and empiricism are perfectly consistent because each is confined to a separate and exclusive realm. The second answer is that Islam and empiricism are diametrically opposed because each presents a view of man and the cosmos contradictory to the other.

The first answer is that given by various proponents of an Islamic modernism or Islamic reformation modeled on Christian Protestantism. They would limit Islam to a few rituals and the personal relation between the individual and God so as to make room for Western modes of thought and institutions in politics, economics, philosophy, etc.

Nevertheless, the modernist answer regarding empiricism is not as easy to dismiss as one might like to

imagine. If we define empiricism as the doctrine that all ideas and knowledge are derived from inner or outer experience, it is difficult to see what is objectionable about this from the point of view of Islam. Even the Prophet's (SAW) knowledge of revelation could be explained as deriving from a kind of inner experience.

The founder of empiricism, John Locke, was a Christian who believed in divine revelations, authentic claims to which, he believed, were supported by the empirical evidence of miracles. If there is an incompatibility between Islam and empiricism, it must be found at a deeper level than the bare statement of its fundamental principles.

As the influence of empiricism spread, it was the emphasis on outer experience that won the allegiance of researchers and scientists. Medieval science seemed to them to have been overrun with presumptions that could not be established by sensory experience, nor proven by the mathematical aspects of reason favored by the rationalists.

For example, it was held that since the planets were the most perfect of bodies and circular motion is the most perfect kind of motion, the orbits of the planets must be circular.

The rejection of this sort of argument was made possible by two sorts of changes in thinking about science, both of which involved a shift in the view of rationality itself. First, the Greek idea of rational intuition or nous had to be dismissed and replaced by a much more limited notion of rationality; and second, the value of the collection of precise empirical data had to be elevated to a level that could overcome the appeal of rational intuition.

These are the changes that were brought about by the combined efforts of the rationalists and the empiricists. What remains of the notion of rationality leaves no room for the religiously reflective intellect or 'aql.

The word 'aql, which is translated as 'intellect' or 'reason' occurs in verbal forms forty-nine times in the Qur'an. If one inspects these ayat, one finds that the operative notion of 'aql in the Qur'an is neither the Greek nous nor the modern Western notion of rationality, although the meaning of nous is certainly closer in meaning to the Qur'anic term than the English rationality.

The Qur'an speaks of examples being given for people to think about, for people who use their 'aql. The things of the earth and heavens, the cycling of night and day, the coming to life of a dead land, all of these are signs of Allah, and the failure to recognize them as such indicates a lack of 'aql.

The faculty of being able to recognize the ultimate significance of things cannot be glossed as syllogistic reasoning, nor as the evaluation and formulation of modern scientific theories. While empiricism concerns itself with the nature of appearances, 'aqlis concerned with seeing through the appearances to the deeper reality behind them, with insight and disclosure.

On the other hand, we do not find a direct contradiction between the reasoning of the empiricist and the exercise of 'aql. The defenders of traditional Islam often point to the differences between modern and traditional concepts as if this were sufficient to establish that the modern is deviant and to be rejected. However, an appreciation of the methods and findings of the empirical sciences by no means need undermine the value of religious reflection.

The approaches to the philosophy of Islam to be found in the writings of both modernists and traditionalists are much too facile to comprehend the complexity of the discord between Islam and empiricism.

The modernist ignores the discord because of the absence of outright contradiction. The traditionalist ignores the possibility of accommodation because of the disparity of outlooks, and because whenever accommodation is mentioned with regard to Islam and modernity, it seems to be accompanied by an expectation that Islam must be changed.

Liberals call for the "reform" of Islam in order to disguise their desire for its disablement. Traditionalists respond with a glorification of the past. Neither seems capable of imagining that the modern might be reformed to come into accord with Islam.

Empiricism is flawed by its unduly restrictive view of rationality. If this view is modified to allow for the rational appreciation of symbolic signification, nothing of essential value in empiricism is thereby lost.

Empiricism, like the modern sciences whose development it influenced, is at odds with Islam because it is informed by concepts which have been used as replacements for those found in the Qur'an and ahadith.

The problem with the modern concept of rationality is just one example of this. The solution is not a rejection of the new concepts, but a rejection of claims that they supersede those of the Islamic traditions. In the rejection of superficial modernism and traditionalism we may also find a more satisfying approach to the fundamental problem of the philosophy of Islam, identifying the scope of Islam and its implications for the sciences and humanities, and particularly for philosophy.

Although Islam cannot be said to contain its own particular microbiology, for example, and for the most part neither contradicts nor implies particular theoretical claims in the natural and human sciences, it does present man with various ideas and concepts which proponents of the sciences or some new philosophy would supplant by those of their own theories.

Here there is an opportunity to advance a new meaning for the idea of Islamic reformation: it is not that Islam is to be reformed in the light of modern theories, but the reverse. The exaggerations of human importance and negligence of Allah which often accompany any form of learning are to be purged by an Islamic reformation of such learning, God willing.

1. Bas C. van Fraassen, The Scientific Image (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

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