

Ibn Sina's theory of God's knowledge

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Abstract

Ibn Sina's philosophy has been dominant in the philosophical tradition of Islam for centuries. Ibn Sina's doctrine of God's knowledge states that God's knowledge is atemporal, absolute and universal. The substance of Ibn Sina's theory of Divine knowledge is that God knows the whole range of causes and effects and their relations. Hence, He knows all particulars not as particulars but as universals. According to Ibn Sina, the eternal knowledge in God is changeless, since it does not depend upon sense-perception which perceives an event when it occurs, but not before or after. On the basis of Ibn Sina's doctrine, the will of the necessary existence is equated with its knowledge of the *good universal world order*. Ibn Sina distinguishes between the kinds of actions resulting from nature, will and accident and those which come from the will while being at the same time due to reason, option and imagination. He identifies the God's knowledge with that which comes from will and is accompanied by reason. His theory of knowledge of the necessary existence is based on the assumption that the knowledge possessed by the necessary existence is a knowledge of its own essence.

In the history of the philosophical thought in the medieval ages, Ibn Sina's doctrine is, in many respects, unique especially, due to his attempts to reformulate the purely rational tradition of Hellenism. His philosophy has been dominant in the philosophical tradition of Islam for centuries.

In the medieval West the reformulation of Roman Catholic theology by Thomas Aquinas, were fundamentally influenced by Ibn Sina.

In general, Ibn Sina's description of God's knowledge is based on the following principles:

- God's knowledge precedes the existence of things and does not follow them.
- God's knowledge is creative and not receptive as human knowledge is.
- God's knowledge is changeless.

Ibn Sina's theory of God's knowledge affirms that sense-perception is not the only way to know the particulars. According to Ibn Sina, although God cannot have perceptual knowledge, He nevertheless knows all particulars in a universal way so that perceptual knowledge is superfluous for Him. God knows, in a determinate manner, the qualities and properties of a particular event. God knows what this particular event will be and can differentiate it completely from all other events even of the same species. When this particular event actually occurs in time, God, not being subject to temporal change, cannot know it. But He also need not know it in this manner for He knows it already¹.

Ibn Sina believes that God's knowledge cannot derive from things because this would make Him dependent upon something other than Himself. In addition, the succession in temporal things make His knowledge changeable from moment to moment. Ibn Sina's doctrine of God's knowledge states that God's knowledge is atemporal, absolute and universal. This knowledge is atemporal since the truth value of the proposition He knows, is independent of temporal aspect and what Ibn Sina means by the absolute is related to atemporality with regard to this knowledge.

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Ibn Sina's theory denied a direct knowledge of particulars as object of sense-perception. God's knowledge of particulars is through a universal knowledge based on causal process. God knows contingencies by knowing the causes of their realization. According to Ibn Sina, God 's knowledge is an order knowledge in accordance with order of causes.

Ibn Sina's theory states that God knows changeable by knowing the general laws which describe the change the entity that is known undergoes².

According to Ibn Sina, the eternal knowledge in God is changeless, since it does not depend upon sense-perception which perceives an event when it occurs, but not before or after. God knows a certain event will occur after a certain other event due to the order of causes and effects, therefore, God does not possess sense-perception.

On the basis of Ibn Sina's doctrine, the will of the necessary existence is equated with its knowledge of the good universal world order³. This will is described as the proper order of nature or the knowledge of best state for the world by a universal order⁴. The knowledge of necessary existence includes this universal order and prescribes the best state for the world. From this point of view, the will of necessary existence cannot be changed by consciousness or choice⁵.

Ibn Sina distinguishes between the kinds of actions resulting from nature, will and accident and those which come from the will

while being at the same time due to reason, option and imagination. He identifies the God's knowledge with that which comes from will and is accompanied by reason⁶.

Ibn Sina supports the theory that a knowledge of its essence enables the necessary existence to know the good universal order (nizam-I khair-I kulli) and since It is the cause of such an order It knows the Good by knowing itself. His theory of knowledge of the necessary existence is based on the assumption that the knowledge possessed by the necessary existence is knowledge of its own essence. The necessary existence is the cause of contingent realm; a knowledge of causes leads to a knowledge of effects. The necessary existence has knowledge of contingent realm by having knowledge of itself.

The Self-knowledge of necessary existence has actualized the world. Peripatetic believe that God knows all things with their distinctive characteristics because His knowledge is creative not receptive. According to this formulation of God 's simple knowledge, in His self-knowledge, knowledge of everything is implicitly involved. The holders of this view define knowledge of a thing as a form which is equivalent to that thing and constitutive of its essence.

The holders of simple knowledge state that it is very nature of simple knowledge to create and apply to everything.

Muslim peripatetic like Ibn Sina and al-Farabi believe that God's knowledge is not separate from Him but is related to His being as necessary attributes are related to an essence⁷. According to Ibn Sina's doctrine, God's knowledge is simple and in its simplicity contains the entire multiplicity of forms⁸. Ibn Sina affirms that in a simple being, "being caused by it" and "being inherent in it"⁹.

Ibn Sina's doctrine states that the knowledge of necessary existence includes a universal order which prescribes the best state for the world. The necessary existence is the primary cause of being and the necessary aspect of the world and its knowledge of the universal order is the cause of the world's persistence. According to Ibn Sina, the necessary existence implements such order of which It has knowledge.

Ibn Sina upholds the concept of self-knowledge as a legitimate form of the knowledge. He discusses the cause of the soul of persons to legitimize the concept of self-knowledge. Ibn Sina refers to the form of humanity as the form of an entity, which is in the soul of the knower and is what is known (and is separated from the substratum matter of the man). The soul has knowledge of itself. It is not separated from itself but received itself, that is to say, the soul knows itself and is known to itself.

Ibn Sina affirms that a multiplicity in the entity that is known does not imply corresponding multiplicity in the knower. According to this principle, Ibn Sina attribute knowledge of multiplicity to the necessary existence¹⁰.

Ibn Sina holds that the only difference between the simple intellect and the conceptual intellect is that what the simple intellect has as a unity, the conceptual intellect possesses in inferential and temporal order. In addition, the simple intellect creates these concepts whereas the conceptual intellect only receives them.

Ibn Sina discusses that if one held the forms constitute the God's knowledge to be a part of his very being, the simplicity of his being would be destroyed. If one held these forms to be related to God as extrinsic accidents, He would not be absolutely necessary. If one held that when these forms are intellected by God they come to exist, they are in some other beings. Ibn Sina affirms that their

existence in a being and their intellection by God must be the same fact¹¹.

Some philosophers like Sadra believes that Ibn Sina interpreted the Platonic Form as an abstract essence devoid of all particularity. Sadra accuses Ibn Sina of confusing unity-by-abstractation with unity-by-integration¹². If one made such forms to be separate from God's being, they would become posterior to God's existence and His knowledge of them. In this case, they could not be God's primordial knowledge.

The basic Sadra's objection to Ibn Sina is that he denies the absolute identity of the intellect and intelligible. According to Sadra, the identity of intellect and intelligible requires that the attributes of knowledge is derived as a notional abstraction from existence as a original reality. Sadra affirms that existence and knowledge are coextensive¹³.

According to Ibn Sina, such forms must be accepted not as part of God's being, nor as His accidents, but as necessary consequences of His being¹⁴.

Al-Suhrawardi holds that Ibn Sina's theory of God's knowledge renders God into a subject characterized by a variety of qualities that inhere in it. It is inconceivable that a substratum is not affected by such qualities. According to al-suhrawardi, God's knowledge is directly related to contingents, and not through prior cognitive forms¹⁵. Sadra's reply to al-Suhrawardi 's objection is that Qualities or attributes affect a subject only when the former are extrinsic to the latter, not when they necessarily arise from it¹⁶.

Ibn Sina affirms that the existence of such forms is not something additional to God' intellection of them, nor is His intellection of them something additional to their existence¹⁷.

Sadra's objection to Ibn Sina's theory of God's knowledge is on the ground that the cognitive forms are described as imprinted upon God's mind just as ideas are imprinted upon our minds when we conceive of things¹⁸.

Sadra raises the question as to how it is possible to conceive of such forms both as existential entities and as inseparable attributes of God¹⁹. According to Sadra, it is not possible to distinguish between divine attributes and their contents. God's attributes inasmuch as they share His absolute existence are existential. On the other hand, when they are regarded as separate from God's being by a kind of mental analysis, they are of the mental order of existence²⁰.

On the basis of a peripatetic's principle, the perfect knowledge of an effect can only be obtained through its cause. According to Sadra, this does not mean that an effect can be conceived only when its cause is conceived. Sadra insists that the principle talks about direct existencial entities, not of indirect interferential essences. Sadra states that the cognitive forms are directly known as existential realities not as mere concepts²¹. Ibn Sina holds that the only difference between the simple intellect and the conceptual intellect is that what the simple intellect has as a unity, the conceptual intellect possesses in inferential and temporal order. In addition, the simple intellect creates these concepts whereas the conceptual intellect only receives them.

References

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² Refl, p246-247

³ The Metaphysica of Avicenna, P. Morewedge, London, 1973, p272-274

⁴ Ibid. p227

⁵ Ibid. p273

- ⁶ Danish Nama-I'ala'I, ed. M. Mo'in, Tehran, 1952, p90-95
- ⁷ The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra, F. Rahman, Albany, 1975, p147
- ⁸ Ibid. pp 145-148.
- ⁹ Ibid. p153
- ¹⁰ Ref 3, p219
- ¹¹ Ibid. p152
- ¹² Asfar, ed. M. Rida al-Muzaffar, Tehran, 1378, p47
- ¹³ Ibid. p149
- ¹⁴ Ref 3, p273
- ¹⁵ Ref 7, p154
- ¹⁶ Ref 12, p199
- ¹⁷ Ref 3, p275
- ¹⁸ Ref 7, p154
- ¹⁹ Ref 12, p229
- ²⁰ Ref 7, p155
- ²¹ Ibid. p157