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The Dominant Islamic Philosophy of Knowledge

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Abstract

The Arab-Islamic culture is certainty-oriented, such that most Arabs and Muslims consider their beliefs to be certainties. This enabled the traditionalist philosophical school of knowledge to be dominant in the Arab-Islamic world. Both Muslim philosophers Al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah articulated the dominant philosophical theory of knowledge. While Al-Ghazali claimed that God creates knowledge in us, Ibn Taymiyyah held that knowledge is justified true belief or a set of beliefs presented by an infallible person, such as the prophet Muhammad. Both philosophers provided a traditionalist account of knowledge, according to which, God is the ultimate source of any genuine belief. Their conceptions of knowledge became dominant in the Arab-Islamic world because their theories of knowledge cohere with the fact that the Arab-Islamic culture is certainty-oriented. The best way to maintain that one's beliefs are certainties, *i.e.* absolutely true and unchangeable, resides in holding that they are the products of God Himself. In addition, one's theory of meaning and causation is related to one's conception of knowledge. While Ibn Taymiyyah's account of meaning paved the way for his endorsement of his unique theory of knowledge, Al-Ghazali's conception of causal relationships, as being unnecessary, led him to accept the traditionalist view that God creates knowledge in us.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Both the eleventh century Muslim philosopher Al-Ghazali and the thirteenth century Muslim philosopher Ibn Taymiyyah articulated the essential doctrines of the traditionalist school of Islamic philosophy. And the tradi-

tionalist school of Islamic philosophy is dominant in the Arab-Islamic world. One basic reason behind its dominance is that it coheres with the fact that the Arab-Islamic culture is certainty-oriented.

2. The Status of Beliefs and the Conception of the World

The best way to understand a certain culture is to compare it with a different culture. From this perspective, it is useful to compare the Arab-Islamic culture with the Western culture in order to clarify certain important aspects of the former, especially with regard to the status of beliefs and the conception of the world. The Arab-Islamic culture is a certainty-oriented culture, while the West is uncertainty-oriented. The Arab-Islamic culture is certainty-oriented in the sense that most Arabs and Muslims consider their beliefs to be certainties, absolutely true, irreplaceable by other beliefs, and can't be subjected to reevaluation and critique. Most Arabs and Muslims today believe that their beliefs are certainties, and that any other set of beliefs different from theirs is false and useless. This is why it seems to be impossible to change most of the beliefs of the Arabs and Muslims. But, in the West, beliefs don't possess the status of being absolute certainties. Most Westerners consider their beliefs to be possibly true or probably true, and hence their beliefs are constantly and willingly subjected to reevaluation, critique and replacement. In this sense, the West is an uncertainty-oriented culture. All of this shows that the status of beliefs in the Arab-Islamic culture is radically different from the status of beliefs in the West.

James W. Neuliep expressed the previous distinction between the East and the West in the following way: "generally, Eastern cultures have a preference for certainty, whereas Western cultures are uncertainty oriented." According to his presentation of this distinction, Westerners seek to obtain new information and engage in uncertain situations, while Easterners are usually satisfied with the information they already have and avoid uncertain situations [1]. Now, this widely discussed difference between the East and the West is applicable to the status of beliefs as we have seen. Beliefs in the East have a different status from beliefs in the West. And thus, the East and the West have distinct conceptions of what beliefs are. For example, most Arabs and Muslims conceive their beliefs as being certainties, while most Westerners tend to conceive their beliefs as being uncertainties. This difference in how beliefs are conceived leads to different conceptions of the world. People who consider their beliefs as certainties will tend to conceive the world as static and controlled by pre-established design, fate and unchangeable abstract entities because an unchangeable world coheres with unchangeable beliefs. But those who conceive their beliefs as uncertainties will conceive the world as a dynamic entity controlled by unpredictable free actions and usually unpredictable and diverse concrete natural causes, given that a changeable and unpredictable world coheres with changeable beliefs.

Since most Arabs and Muslims are convinced that their beliefs are certainties, it follows that they are inclined to hold that their beliefs are irreplaceable and unchangeable. But the best way to maintain one's beliefs as unchangeable certainties is to conceive the world as being predetermined and/or fixed by pre-established design or fate, given that pre-established design or fate is unchangeable. Thus, the fact that most Arabs and Muslims consider their beliefs to be certainties forces the Arab-Islamic culture to be fate-oriented culture. This shows that the fact that the Arab-Islamic culture is certainty-oriented perfectly coheres with the fact that the Arab-Islamic culture is fate-oriented. Yet if one doesn't consider one's beliefs to be certainties, and hence one conceives one's beliefs as changeable, then one is not inclined to perceive the world as unchangeable and fixed by predetermined fate. But rather a changeable world will turn out to be acceptable, given that changeable beliefs are acceptable. This is why Western culture as an uncertainty-oriented culture, which doesn't conceive its beliefs as certainties, is not fate-oriented. All of this shows that the status of beliefs plays a major role in forming cultures.

3. The Competing Philosophical Schools of Knowledge

In the golden ages of the Arab-Islamic culture, there were competing schools of philosophy which defined knowledge in different ways. These schools could be divided into two main camps: the rationalist school and the traditionalist school. Many Muslim philosophers participated in developing Islamic rationalism. Some of those philosophers are the eleventh century philosopher Ibn Sina and the twelfth century philosopher Ibn Rushd (who is known in the West as Averroes). According to the rationalist school developed by Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd, one's beliefs should correspond to reality and should be justified by objective and logical justifications in order for one's beliefs to constitute knowledge [2]. Ibn Rushd articulated the essence of rationalism when he held that when there is an apparent contradiction between religion and the conclusions of reason, religion such as Islam should be reinterpreted in order for it to cohere with the conclusions of reason [3]. But the traditionalist school

declared that if a certain contradiction between reason and religion occurs, then the conclusions of reason should be reinterpreted in order to fit and cohere with religion. From the perspective of the rationalist school, reason is the ultimate criterion of truth and knowledge, while, according to the traditionalist school, religion is the ultimate criterion of truth and knowledge.

Both philosophers Al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah represent the traditionalist school. Al-Ghazali maintained that God creates knowledge in us when the conditions of knowledge are satisfied. For example, when we have justified true beliefs, God interferes and creates knowledge in us. Through endorsing this specific conception of knowledge, Al-Ghazali was able to account for the existence of an active God, who constantly creates and designs the whole universe and everything within it [4]. Al-Ghazali represents the traditionalist school of Islamic philosophy due to the fact that he defended the view that Islam has the highest priority over the conclusions of independent reasoning. And he articulated the priority of Islam through accounting for an active Islamic God, who continuously creates everything including human knowledge.

Similarly, Ibn Taymiyyah represents the traditionalist school of Islamic philosophy through expressing that Islam possesses the highest priority over the conclusions of independent reasoning, although he tried to unify between religion, namely Islam, and reason. Ibn Taymiyyah developed his unique theory of knowledge. Ibn Taymiyyah held that knowledge is justified true belief or a set of beliefs presented by an infallible person, such as the prophet Muhammad. In doing so, he was able to account for both philosophical and scientific knowledge, which is based on justified true beliefs, and religious knowledge, which is based on transmission of beliefs by infallible prophets. Hence, from his point of view, he was able to unify between reason and religion. And through his definition of knowledge he was also able to account for the traditionalist belief that Islam is a genuine part of knowledge, given that it is transmitted to us by an infallible prophet [5]. The first part of Ibn Taymiyyah's analysis of knowledge, namely knowledge is justified true belief, is usually ignored in the Islamic world, while the second part of his analysis, which defines knowledge as transmission of beliefs by an infallible person, is well-known and dominant among most of the Muslims.

4. Traditionalism and Certainties

According to most of the Muslims, God creates knowledge in us. This could be done either through the constant interference of God, such that God directly creates knowledge in us when the conditions of knowledge are satisfied, as it is articulated by Al-Ghazali, or through obtaining knowledge from Islam itself, which is revealed by God and transmitted to us by an infallible prophet, as it is expressed in Ibn Taymiyyah's philosophy. In this sense, Al-Ghazali's and Ibn Taymiyyah's conceptions of knowledge shape the minds of most Muslims. But why is the traditionalist school of Islamic philosophy dominating the minds of most of the Muslims? The answer resides in the Arab-Islamic culture itself.

The fact that the Arab-Islamic culture is certainty-oriented led to the dominance of the traditionalist school of Islamic philosophy, which is based on either Al-Ghazali's or Ibn Taymiyyah's theory of knowledge. The Arab-Islamic culture is certainty-oriented, such that in the Arab-Islamic world only certainties are considered to be genuine beliefs. And, by definition, knowledge caused in us by God (as Al-Ghazali maintained) and/or transmitted to us by an infallible person (as Ibn Taymiyyah claimed) consists of certainties. This shows that the fact that the Arab-Islamic culture is certainty-oriented perfectly coheres with Al-Ghazali's conception of knowledge and Ibn Taymiyyah's theory of knowledge, paving the way for their dominance in the Arab-Islamic world. In other words, the traditionalist school of Islamic philosophy, as it is manifested in both Al-Ghazali's and Ibn Taymiyyah's philosophies, is dominant in the Arab-Islamic world because it is consistent with the fact that the Arab-Islamic culture is certainty-oriented.

Moreover, since the Western culture is uncertainty-oriented such that beliefs could be replaced by other beliefs if new evidences or justifications are obtained, it is natural that the West generally conceives knowledge as justified true belief. But since the Arab-Islamic culture is certainty-oriented such that beliefs are unchangeable and irreplaceable, it is natural that it conceives knowledge as a set of beliefs caused and/or presented by an infallible God or prophet. The infallibility of the source of beliefs will guarantee that the beliefs are certainties, such that they are unchangeable and irreplaceable. Most of the Arabs and Muslims consider their beliefs to be certainties. And the best way to maintain one's beliefs as certainties is to believe that one's beliefs are produced and presented by an infallible God or an infallible prophet. When the source of one's beliefs is infallible, one's beliefs are certainties. This is why the view that knowledge is a set of beliefs produced and/or transmitted by an

infallible God or prophet became the dominant conception of knowledge in the Arab-Islamic world. And this shows that the fact that the Arab-Islamic culture is certainty-oriented laid down the foundation for the dominance of a specific Islamic conception of knowledge, according to which, knowledge is a set of beliefs caused and/or presented by an infallible being.

5. Meaning, Causation and Knowledge

One's theory of meaning is related to one's conception of knowledge. It seems that philosophers disagree on analyzing knowledge because they disagree on the appropriate account of meaning. For example, if we define meaning in terms of human reason and facts, we will be inclined to analyze knowledge in terms of facts and reason, given that knowledge is a set of true beliefs about the meanings of words and propositions. But if we define meaning in terms of the context of speech such that the context of speech determines the meanings of words and sentences, we will tend to analyze knowledge in terms of different contexts, such as the religious, the philosophical or the scientific context. This is so because knowledge amounts to knowing the true meanings of concepts and propositions. From this perspective, Ibn Taymiyyah's theory of meaning led him to endorse a specific conception of knowledge, according to which, knowledge is justified true belief or a transmission of beliefs by an infallible person.

According to Ibn Taymiyyah, the context determines the meaning of words and sentences [5]. But there are different contexts, such as the philosophical, the scientific and the religious context. Therefore, these diverse contexts determine the meanings of our concepts and expressions. Yet knowledge amounts to knowing the genuine meanings of words and propositions. Hence, the different contexts of religion, philosophy and science determine knowledge. This shows that Ibn Taymiyyah's conception of meaning probably led him to his unique analysis of knowledge, which accounts for religious, philosophical and scientific knowledge at the same time. And he was able to account for these different kinds of knowledge through maintaining that knowledge is either justified true belief or beliefs transmitted to us by an infallible person. Since Ibn Taymiyyah's theory of meaning entails that meanings are determined by the diverse contexts of religion, science and philosophy, it follows that knowledge is also determined by religion, science and philosophy. And the best way to express this conclusion is through holding that knowledge is either justified true belief, as knowledge manifests itself in philosophy and science, or a set of beliefs delivered to us by an infallible person, as knowledge manifests itself in religious beliefs presented to us by infallible prophets.

In addition, one's conception of causation also plays a vital role in the formation of one's theory of knowledge, exactly as one's account of meaning does. From the viewpoint of Al-Ghazali, facts determine the meanings of concepts. For example, the meaning of the concept "sun" is determined by the sun itself. Yet, in Al-Ghazali's philosophical paradigm, causes don't necessarily cause their effects but rather God enables the causes to lead to their effects [6]. Therefore, according to Al-Ghazali, God enables the meaning of the concept "sun" to be determined by the actual sun. And hence, for Al-Ghazali, meanings are ultimately determined by God. But knowledge amounts to knowing the genuine meanings of concepts and propositions. Thus, Al-Ghazali's philosophy of meaning and causation implies that knowledge is determined by God Himself. And Al-Ghazali expressed this conclusion through claiming that God creates knowledge in us whenever the conditions of knowledge are satisfied. All of this indicates that Al-Ghazali's conception of meaning and causation led him to develop and endorse his theory of knowledge, according to which, knowledge is created in us by God.

6. Simplicity and Success

Both Al-Ghazali's and Ibn Taymiyyah's theory of knowledge are simple and comprehensible by illiterates and intellectuals. This explains why their theories of knowledge dominated the minds of most of the Muslims. If someone will ask about what knowledge is, Al-Ghazali will answer: "knowledge is the set of beliefs created in us by God whenever the conditions of knowledge are satisfied". This account of knowledge is very simple, such that anyone can understand it. And this kind of simplicity paved the way for its dominance. Similarly, Ibn Taymiyyah's conception of knowledge is very simple, such that any person could comprehend it. This ultimately led to its dominance in the Arab-Islamic world. If Ibn Taymiyyah is asked about what knowledge is, he will say that it is either the beliefs provided to us by science or philosophy or the beliefs presented to us by the prophets, such as the prophet Muhammad. This is a simple and straightforward answer, leading to its acceptance by many Muslims. Yet the rationalist school of Islamic philosophy does not provide simple philosophical theories because it

is based on the endorsement of independent justifications, which are usually changeable and unpredictable. And relying on changeable reasoning and justifications doesn't cohere with the Islamic conception of a predetermined and unchangeable world. This strongly participated in the failure of Islamic rationalism in Islamic culture.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, most of the Muslims are traditionalists. This indicates that the traditionalist school of Islamic philosophy defeated the rationalist school in the Arab-Islamic world. One basic reason behind the success and dominance of Islamic traditionalism and the decline of Islamic rationalism is the fact that the traditionalist school of Islamic philosophy, unlike Islamic rationalism, coheres with the fact that the Arab-Islamic culture is certainty-oriented.

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