

KNOWLEDGE, INNATE CONCEPTS, AND THE JUSTIFICATION FOR THE BELIEF IN GOD

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The epistemological approach of evidentialism maintains that a belief must have sufficient evidence in order to be rationally justified. The belief in God is no exception and, hence, it too must pass the litmus test of evidence as a measure of its rational justification. But what counts as evidence? Responding to this question and identifying the nature of the evidence that can be used to justify belief has become a point of contention between philosophers. While some evidentialists have denied the possibility of evidence for the belief in God, others have attacked the very basis of the evidentialist claim by promoting belief in God without evidence. The following paper briefly describes these two currents and culminates by discussing the notion of innate concepts and presential knowledge as proposed by Mulla Sadra. According to the authors, this type of presential knowledge can be included as “evidence” even from the evidentialist point of view which does not limit evidence to conceptual knowledge.

Keywords: *Belief in God, sufficient knowledge, justification, evidentialism, presential knowledge (al-‘ilm al-huḍūrī), innate concepts, Mulla Sadra.*

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the possibility of believing in God and the unmediated knowledge of Him, which in the Arabic philosophical terminology is known as *al-‘ilm al-huḍūrī* (presential knowledge, knowledge by presence, or unmediated knowledge).

One of the epistemological approaches to the rationality of belief is evidentialism. This theory maintains that a belief ought to be based on sufficient evidence in order to be rationally acceptable. Some evidentialist critics of theism

contend that there is no sufficient evidence for the belief in God to be rationally justified, while the typical response from theists is to attempt to provide sufficient evidence for it, or at least to show that the belief in God is rational or plausible. What is important to note is that theists can claim to be rational or warranted in their beliefs even if they cannot convince atheists that God exists.

The crucial question here is whether belief in God needs evidential support to be rationally justified. Evidentialism holds that belief in God is rationally acceptable only if there is sufficient evidence to support it. Bearing this in mind, some evidentialist philosophers contend that in so far as there is no sufficient evidence for the belief in God, it cannot be rationally justified.

We want to establish that the belief in God is based on a direct awareness which is self-evident; it is possible to have unmediated knowledge of God which is not based on inference. In so far as it is not based on inference, the belief in God is innate, according to the foundationalist perspective. It is also rationally justified even using the evidentialist criteria since it is based on sufficient evidence, and that is the direct awareness of God through presential knowledge. In other words, the notion of evidence is broad and can be extended to include personal and subjective evidence as well. We will show that personal evidence can be reckoned as sufficient evidence, because it is considered to be a convincing evidence for individuals.

One of the best direct approaches to understand the inclination towards God is intuitive knowledge through the study of the self. Self-knowledge (*ma'rifat al-nafs*), which is based on unmediated knowledge of the self, is a convincing and decisive approach, and from one perspective, is actually prior to conceptual knowledge. By probing our consciousness and awareness of the self, we find in ourselves the innate inclination towards God. Our knowledge of such an innate tendency is presential.

This paper also examines the theory that human beings can have immediate and direct awareness of God through knowledge by presence. We will show how presential knowledge functions in this regard, and how important the role of presential knowledge is in a religious epistemology. This type of knowledge shows that first, human beings may have unmediated knowledge of God, and second, they have an innate inclination towards God. Therefore, it provides a high degree of warrant for belief in God.

Evidence and Sufficient Evidence

The word “evidence” is derived from the Latin *ex videre* which means “to see”. The term is used to state the justification of a belief, or to justify that what people believe in is true. It should be noted that an epistemologist can only

talk about subjective evidence through which one reaches truths. From Kant's point of view, knowledge is a cognitive attitude that is both subjectively and objectively certain: the knower knows that the grounds of his knowledge are adequate. But belief or faith is based on grounds that are subjectively convincing (see: Kant 1965: 645–652).

Evidentialists maintain that a belief is rationally justified if there is an adequate or sufficient reason to support it. But what does 'adequate' evidence mean? It is difficult to give an exact answer; perhaps we can say that adequate evidence is one that is convincing – i.e., one that results in the conviction or confidence to accept a belief. We may suggest that one needs evidence for a belief to the degree to which he or she may accept it. The sufficiency of evidence depends upon the individual's own agreement and satisfaction. Accordingly, if one bases his belief on testimony as personal evidence, or bases it on presential knowledge, or bases his belief on personal experience, he is justified in his belief in the opposite circumstances.

Consider the case of a believer in religion who has grown up in a religious household. Why does he believe in God? Perhaps, as Kierkegaard suggests, it is because his parents, whom he loved and trusted, told him about God. If the child felt that the parents were untrustworthy, he may well have rejected their testimony. The child believes in God because evidence tells him that his parents' word is trustworthy, unless he encounters sufficient contrary evidence to justify disbelief. Therefore, we may extend the notion of evidence to include personal evidence, because evidence is not restricted to public evidence. In this regard, Stephen Davis states:

Private evidence must be appealed to in general knowledge as well as in religious faith, and so if the "arbitrariness" charge can be made against the conclusions of religious faith, it can also be made against some of the accepted conclusions of general knowledge. My point will be that if it is not dogmatic to use private evidence as the ultimate ground for such a proposition as "The external world exists," then it is not dogmatic to use private evidence as the ultimate ground for such a proposition as "God exists". (Davis 1978: 214–215)

Rationality

A rational person is one who takes the middle stance between the two vices of credulity and skepticism—one who avoids believing too much or believing too little. The credulous person is one who believes everything he is told while the skeptic is one who believes only what he sees with his own eyes.

According to some philosophers the criterion of rationality is to accept only true beliefs. They have proposed that the criterion of rationality is to test it by evidence. With respect to the belief in God, they hold that in order to decide whether belief in God is rational, we have to find out whether there is sufficient evidence for the existence of God. The crucial question here is whether a person can believe in something rationally without having evidence for that belief. A distinction should be made here with regard to the meaning of evidence. In the broad sense of the term, we may say that a person cannot believe something rationally without having evidence for the belief, whether it be propositional (syllogistic) or non-propositional (non-syllogistic) in nature.

Many philosophers, both theists and atheists, have accepted this criterion for the rationality of belief. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), Rene Descartes (1596–1650), John Locke (1632–1704), and many others considered it appropriate to apply this test of rationality to the belief in God. From this point of view, a belief is rationally justified if, and only if, there is sufficient evidence for the belief; sufficient evidence here includes propositional and non-propositional evidence, inferential and non-inferential evidence. In *Warranted Christian Beliefs*, Alvin Plantinga defines evidentialism as “the view that belief in God is rationally justifiable or acceptable only if there is *good evidence* for it, where good evidence would be arguments from other propositions one knows” (Plantinga 1993: 70).

It is very important to know the relationship between religious belief and evidence. Locke contends that faith is wholly based upon evidence. He defines the terms reason and faith in a similar manner as Aquinas. However, Aquinas holds that faith is partially based upon evidence. In order to know God, Aquinas says, we must assent to certain propositions. Some of these propositions (e.g., “God exists”) can be proven by human reason alone. But certain others (e.g., “God is three in one”) can be known only because God has revealed them. Human reason can thus carry us part of the way to God, but faith is necessary to complete the journey. In contrast, in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke states:

Whatever God hath revealed is certainly true: No doubt can be made of it. This is the proper object of faith: but whether it is a divine revelation or not, reason must judge...Nothing that is contrary to, and inconsistent with, the clear and self-evident dictates of reason, has a right to be urged or assented to as a matter of faith. (Aquinas 1975)

Elsewhere, he states:

Faith is nothing but a firm assent of the mind: which if it be regulated, as is our duty, cannot be afforded to anything, but upon good reason; and so cannot be opposite to it... This at least is certain, that he must be accountable for whatever mistakes he runs into: whereas he that makes use of the light and faculties God has given him, and seeks sincerely to discover truth, by those helps and abilities he has, may have this satisfaction in doing his duty as a rational creature. (Locke 1996: 413–414)

Evidentialism and Belief in God

On the basis of the evidentialist approach, some philosophers such as William K. Clifford (1845–1879) (see: Clifford 1879: 345), Brand Blanshard (1892–1987) (see: Blanshard 1974: 400), Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) (see: Russell 1957: 3), Michael Scriven (1928) (see: Scriven 1966: 87), and Antony Flew (1923–2010) (see: Flew 1976: 22) contend that belief in God is not rationally acceptable because, as they assert, the evidence for it is insufficient. Russell was once asked what he would say if, after dying, he were brought into the presence of God and asked why he had not been a believer. He replied, “I’d say ‘Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence!’” (Salmon 1978: 176)

William Clifford, the nineteenth century British mathematician, physicist, and influential evidentialist, contends by stating “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” (Clifford 1879: 183). Of course, the claim that he emphasized was a moral evaluation of believing, not an epistemic evaluation. According to Clifford’s point of view, it is irrational or unreasonable to believe in something without sufficient evidence or argument. Similarly, in *Reason and Belief*, Blanshard (d. 1987) says:

[...] everywhere and always belief has an ethical aspect. There is a thing as a general ethics of the intellect. The main principle of that ethic I hold to be the same inside and outside religion. This principle is simple and sweeping: Equate your assent to the evidence. (Blanshard 1974: 401)

Some philosophers extended the notion of epistemic duty to include withholding belief from what is not supported by evidence. Richard Feldman (1948), for instance, holds that it implies that (1) we have a duty to believe what is supported by our evidence, as well as (2) a duty to withhold belief from what is not supported by our evidence. Both Locke and Clifford focus on the failures to act on the second duty, and discuss less about the first.

Locke talks about the person who is “in love with his own fancies” and believes without a good reason. Clifford discusses our duty to question “all that we believe”. His famous saying is only referring to the crime of believing without good evidence. But they could have also highlighted cases in which people fail to believe despite having good evidence. (see: Mosser 1993)

Plantinga’s Theory against Evidentialism

Alvin Plantinga (1932) considers evidentialism as an obstacle to his rational theism without evidence. He examines the evidentialist objection to theistic belief, according to which belief in God is unreasonable or irrational because of insufficient evidence (Plantinga 1967: 16–17), and discusses the objection that “it is irrational and unreasonable to accept theistic belief in the absence of arguments or evidence for the existence of God” (ibid.: 26), attempting to refute the evidentialist objection to the reasonableness of the belief in God. In his early book, *God and Other Minds*, Plantinga defends the notion of rationality of belief in God despite the lack of evidence or argument. He argues that belief in God is in the same category as belief in other minds, since belief in other minds does not require evidence in order to be rational; in the same manner, belief in God does not require the evidence to be rational: “If my belief in other minds is rational, so is my belief in God. But obviously the former is rational; so, therefore, is the latter” (ibid.: 271). According to him, in these cases, neither do we have any proof or argument, nor do we need any proof or argument. His argument on the basis of analogy coincides with the one proposed by John Calvin (1509–1554). He also endorses this position in his *Reason and Belief in God*, and states:

The fact is, Calvin thinks, one who does not believe in God is in an epistemically substandard position—rather like a man who does not believe that his wife exists, or thinks she is like a cleverly constructed robot and has no thoughts, feelings, or consciousness. (ibid.: 66)

As we have seen, Plantinga considered evidentialism as the obstacle to his “rational theism without evidence”, and attempted to refute the evidentialist objection to the rationality of belief in God. Plantinga’s interpretation of evidentialism may be flawed since he restricts evidence to inferential evidence only. In his understanding, what is meant by evidence according to evidentialism is inferential evidence, whereas evidence in evidentialist terminology is not restricted to inferential evidence; rather, it includes both types—non-inferential as well as inferential.

It is precisely because of the breadth of the term “evidence” as defined by the evidentialists themselves, that we may say that belief in God is based on a direct awareness that is self-evident—i.e., we can have unmediated knowledge of God that is self-evident and not based on inference. Therefore, the belief in God from the foundationalist perspective is inherent and not derived from inference. This belief is rationally justified on the very basis of the evidentialist criteria because it is based on sufficient evidence—i.e., the direct awareness through presential knowledge. For this reason, we must extend the import of evidence to include personal and private evidence. It has been shown that personal evidence can be considered sufficient evidence since it is taken as convincing evidence on an individual basis.

Justification for Belief

Foundationalism is an epistemological position that assumes knowledge to have a foundation—i.e., all knowledge is traced back to certain self-evident axiomatic truths. Unlike Plantinga who held that evidentialism is rooted in foundationalism, it seems that it is foundationalism that is based on evidentialism. To explain, according to evidentialism, we need to have sufficient evidence for our beliefs to be rationally justified. This sufficient evidence should either be a properly basic belief or eventually rooted on a properly basic belief—in other words, evidentialism is based on the principles of foundationalism. On the other hand, accounts of epistemic justification by foundationalists assert that a belief is justified epistemologically only if it is either properly basic or ultimately grounded on properly basic beliefs. This very idea of grounding our beliefs on those which are properly basic is another way of saying our beliefs must be based on evidence, which is the position of evidentialism.

Since Plantinga argued that evidentialism is rooted in classical foundationalism, he initially attempted to reject classical foundationalism in order to refute the evidentialist challenge to the rationality of belief in God. However, the following questions can be asked: Does the theory of the axiomatic belief in God require the rejection of classical foundationalism? Can we justify the axiomatic belief in God on the basis of internalist foundationalist criteria? The purpose here is to explore epistemic foundationalism, and then to defend deontological internalism with some complementary accounts to present a new version of internalist foundationalism.

How do we gain knowledge? Where and how do we start this cognitive process? How can we disprove the skeptical regress argument that shows we have no justification in believing anything about the external world? These

are questions that must be addressed in order to have a clear understanding of the topic at hand.

It is almost unanimously agreed that knowledge is justified true belief. Clarence Irving Lewis (1883–1964) says: “Knowledge is belief which not only is true but also is justified in its believing attitude” (Ayer 1956: 28). Furthermore, Alfred J. Ayer (1910–1989) considers knowledge as “the right to be sure” (ibid.). Likewise, in speaking of the question ‘what is knowledge?’ Roderick Chisholm (1916–1999) suggests that “the traditional or classical answer and the one proposed in Plato’s dialogue, the *Theaetetus*, is that knowledge is justified true belief” (ibid.). Laurence Bonjour (see: Bonjour 1985) holds that the traditional “justified true belief” account of knowledge is at least approximately correct. However, Plantinga disagrees with this definition and holds that:

We cannot, in most cases at least, bring it about directly that our beliefs are true, but we can presumably bring it about directly (though perhaps only in the long run) that they are epistemically justified. It follows that one’s cognitive endeavours are epistemically justified only if and to the extent that they are aimed at this goal, which means very roughly that one accepts all and only those beliefs which one has good reason to think are true. (Plantinga 1993: 8)

That is why the main question in the theory of knowledge is ‘what is required for a justified belief?’ How are we justified in holding beliefs about the external world? What makes a proposition justified for a person? But it has to be said that Plantinga’s ultimate aim is not justification; rather, it is to suggest a satisfying and accurate account of warrant. In *Warrant: The Current Debate*, he says, “Justification is a fine thing, a valuable state of affairs, intrinsically as well as extrinsically; but it is neither necessary nor sufficient for warrant.” (ibid.: 45)

Epistemic Justification for Belief in God

When we discuss the justification for the belief in God, we need to distinguish between the epistemic justification for the belief in God and the metaphysical justification for belief. In natural theology, most of the arguments for the existence of God pertain to the metaphysical justification for His existence, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. In *Epistemic Justification*, William P. Alston (1921–2009) distinguishes between one’s being justified in believing that P, and one’s justifying one’s belief that P, and says:

The latter involves one's doing something to show that P, or to show that one's belief was justified... I might be justified in believing that there is milk on the table because I see it is there, even though I have done nothing to show that there is milk on the table or to show that I am justified in believing there to be. (Alston 1976: 82–83)

Externalists hold that we do not need internal factors for a belief to be justified. Externalism can be traced back to Thomas Reid (1710–1796), Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), and, in fact, to Aristotle (384–322 BC) himself. It, in turn, has many different forms, one of the most prominent being reliabilism. According to the reliabilist, it is not the case that in order for a belief to be justified one must have some sort of special or privileged access to the fact. But a belief would be epistemically justified if it was produced or caused in a way or via a process that makes belief objectively likely to be true. Such a mode of belief production is thus a reliable source of true beliefs. Some contemporary reliabilists are David M. Armstrong (1926–2014), Fred I. Dretske (1932–2013), Alvin I. Goldman (1938), and William Alston (1921–2009).

Intuitive Knowledge

Do we, human beings have any innate ideas without any instruction and training? Some philosophers and theologians maintain that human beings are not born with innate ideas. They hold that all of our knowledge is acquired and comes from experience and training. They say that once somebody is born, his mind is like a blank sheet. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), John Locke (1632–1704), George Berkeley (1685–1753), and David Hume (1711–1776), for instance, held this doctrine. In contrast, some philosophers such as Plato (428–348 BC), Descartes (1596–1650), Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716), and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) held that human beings have some innate ideas which are not rooted in the senses; rather, these ideas exist in the mind before any perception by the senses. Descartes held that some terms like existence, unity, shape, time, motion, and distance are innate ideas; according to him, the mind obtained these without any sense perception. Descartes says:

If we bear well in mind the scope of our senses, and what it is exactly that reaches our faculty of thinking by way of them, we must admit that in no case are the ideas of them presented to us by the senses just as we form them in our thinking. So much so that there is nothing in our ideas which is not innate to the mind or the faculty of thinking, with the sole exception of those circumstances which relate to experience such as the

fact that we judge that this or that idea which we have immediately before our mind refers to a certain thing situated outside us. We make such a judgment not because these things transmit ideas to our minds through the sense organs, but because they transmit something which, at exactly that moment, gives the mind occasion to form these ideas by means of the faculty innate to it. Nothing reaches our mind from external objects through the sense organs except certain corporeal motions, as our author himself admits in article nineteen, in accordance with my own principles. But neither the motions themselves nor the figures arising from them are conceived by us exactly as they occur in the sense organs, as I have explained at length in my *Optics*. Hence it follows that the very ideas of the motions themselves and of the figures are innate (innatas) in us. The ideas of pain, colours, sounds and the like must be all the more innate, if on the occasion of certain corporeal motions, our mind is to be capable of representing them to itself, for there is no similarity (similitudinem) between these ideas and the corporeal motions. (Descartes 1985: 304)

Plato believed in the theory of recollection. He maintained that when one is born, he knows everything. The human soul, before it enters this world, learnt everything in another realm which he calls the world of ideas. For him, knowledge is nothing but remembering and recollection. Teaching is reminding and the teacher is just the one who reminds us of what we already knew ourselves. Plato says in *Phaedo* one of his the best-known dialogues:

Our present argument applies no more to equality than it does to absolute beauty, goodness, uprightness, holiness, and, as I maintain, all those characteristics which we designate in our discussions by the term “absolute.” So we must have obtained knowledge of all these characteristics before our birth. That is so. And unless we invariably forget it after obtaining it we must always be born knowing and continue to know all through our lives, because “to know” means simply to retain the knowledge which one has acquired, and not to lose it. (Plato 1909–1914: 75)

In his *Essay*, Locke remarked that the supposition that we human beings have innate principles or some primary notions which the soul receives on its creation, and brings into the world with it, is false. Locke held that men may arrive at knowledge without the assistance of any innate impressions (see: Locke 1996). According to Locke, the first and principal source of our ideas is our sensory impression of physical objects. He says:

Our understandings derive all the materials of thinking from observations that we make of external objects that can be perceived through the senses, and of the internal operations of our minds, which we perceive by looking in at ourselves. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from which arise all the ideas we have or can naturally have. (ibid.: II/18)

He held that cognitive reflection is dependent on sense perception in that our minds do not have any operations for us to be aware of until sense perception has provided them with impressions to operate with (ibid.: II/23–24). Locke rejected universal principles, arguing that there do not exist any principles to which the whole of mankind gives a universal assent. He contends that the proposition “Whatsoever is, is”, and “It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be”, are not universally assented to, as some philosophers have claimed. But it seems that consent among men is an indication, and not a demonstration, of an innate principle as Leibniz held. (see: Leibniz 1986)

In attempting to substantiate his view, Locke remarked that if human beings had innate knowledge, it would necessarily have to be present in everyone, including the insane and children right from birth. He says:

Children and idiots have no thought—not an inkling—of these principles, and that fact alone is enough to destroy the universal assent that any truth that was genuinely innate would have to have. For it seems to me nearly a contradiction to say that there are truths imprinted on the soul that it doesn’t perceive or understand—because if “imprinting” means anything it means making something be perceived: to imprint anything on the mind without the mind’s perceiving it seems to me hardly intelligible. So if children and idiots have souls, minds, with those principles imprinted on them, they can’t help perceiving them and assenting to them. Since they don’t do that, it is evident that the principles are not innately impressed upon their minds. If they were naturally imprinted, and thus innate, how could they be unknown? To say that a notion is imprinted on the mind, and that the mind is ignorant of it and has never paid attention to it, is to make this impression nothing. No proposition can be said to be in the mind which it has never known or been conscious of. (Locke 1996: II/4)

However, Locke’s argument against innate knowledge is flawed because his example of the insane is inaccurate. When we say that human beings have innate knowledge we mean that all sane people have this sort of knowledge; in other words, the example of the insane does not weaken the argument for

innate knowledge. Locke's argument of children is also unsound, because when we state that humans have innate knowledge we mean that everyone has the *potentiality* of innate knowledge, which needs to be actualized. This potentiality is actualized gradually as children grow up—i.e., children develop such knowledge in the course of their normal growth.

Locke also employs the theory of concept acquisition to refute innate knowledge. His perspective is that all of knowledge needs experience. According to this perspective, if there is no innate concept, there would not be any innate knowledge since innate knowledge requires concepts. Knowledge, Locke says, is essentially propositional, so it would not be possible without some concepts. Thus there can be no innate knowledge, at least in the sense of propositional knowledge, unless there are also innate concepts, which he rejects. Instead, he maintains that we derive simple concepts from experience and, through the process of abstraction, we isolate the common features of various things. He says:

The acts in which the mind exerts its power over its simple ideas are chiefly these three: 1. Combining several simple ideas into one compound one; that is how all complex ideas are made. 2. Bringing together two ideas, whether simple or complex, setting them side by side so as to see them both at once, without uniting them into one; this is how the mind gets all its ideas of relations. 3. Separating them from all other ideas that accompany them in their real existence; this is called abstraction, and it is how all the mind's general ideas are made. (ibid.: I/43)

Locke's argument seems circular, because without presupposing the concept of the features, how can we distinguish common features from non-common ones? Therefore, there must exist concepts—regardless of whether a person is conscious of them or not—prior to the process of abstracting a concept from experience.

The theory of abstracting a concept from experience is incomplete. Consider the concept green; do all shades of green in so far as they are different shades have something in common? The answer cannot be positive. The concept of green is not an idea of a common feature abstracted from differing green things, but rather it is an idea of a particular shade of green that is then used to represent the whole range. This cannot be learned from experience. It would seem that the boundaries between the various colours must somehow be specified innately.

Empiricists offer an alternative theory regarding the origin of concepts, which pertains to linguistic training. The empiricist will say that concepts can be acquired by experience through a process of learning. However, this

perspective is flawed since we know that there are some people, or groups of people, who use simple concepts, without having been taught to do so.

Mulla Sadra's View

In the midst of this debate between the empiricists on the one hand, and the rationalists on the other, we can offer a third perspective which is that of Mulla Sadra¹ (*Šadr al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Shirāzī*, 1571/2–1640). From the Sadrian point of view, the fundamental principles of human thought are innate while the particulars of human knowledge are acquired. According to him, human beings have innate ideas, but not in Plato's or even in Descartes' sense; rather, they are acquainted with these ideas gradually without any instruction. In fact, by denying innate knowledge as the fundamental building block of all subsequent knowledge, we can only find ourselves at the precipice of doubt which culminates in an attitude of skepticism.

However, to say that the primary principles of human thought are innate principles is not to say that we have innate ideas independent of any sense perception. For Sadra, human beings have innate ideas, but these ideas are formed gradually in the minds. The human mind gradually acquires these ideas from sense perception. Accordingly, all self-evident propositions are acquired when sensory information has been acquired for the mind. This standpoint differs from Descartes', because Descartes held that innate ideas come from pure reason; in other words, he believed that innate ideas are an innate characteristic of reason and do not belong to sense perception at all. From Sadra's point of view, however, we may conclude that all universal notions are derived from sense perceptions and a person's exposure to external objects. It is impossible for our minds to have these notions in and of themselves. We may imagine a universal notion of humans only after considering some of their particulars. The argument is that if we are able to imagine universal notions without their particulars, then the relationship between a universal notion and its own particulars, and the relationship between a universal notion and the particulars of other universal notions would have been the same. In other words, the notion of humans, for instance, would have corresponded with the particulars of humans and with the particulars of non-humans indifferently.

As a result, all innate ideas and universal notions which correspond with sensations come from sense perception. It is in this way that we can understand Aristotle's claim that the man who is deprived of his senses is unable to have

1 Sadra is perhaps the single most important and influential Iranian philosopher in the Muslim world in the last four hundred years.

intellectual perception. If one lacks the sense of seeing, for instance, he will be unable to imagine the universal notion of vision. In this sense, Locke is right in saying that a person is born with a blank sheet. But it should be noted that sense perception is not the only source of our concepts; human cognitive faculties have other functions that we may call abstractions (*i`tibāriyāt*). We have abstract concepts—such as the concepts of causality, universality, etc.—that are not derived from sensations and experiences.

Further to this, we also have another type of knowledge that is fundamentally different from acquired knowledge—that is, knowledge acquired through mental concepts. It is this second type of knowledge, often referred to as presential knowledge, which is operative in human beings right from birth. Hence, even though a human being has no inferential knowledge or abstract ideas at birth, his presential knowledge is active. One knows the self, as well as some of his innate inclinations, through knowledge by presence. One knows the actuality of his or her being, the feeling of hunger, pleasure and pain, the reality of the will and the like, through this knowledge. This kind of knowledge is certainly not derived from sensations and experiences since it is not representational.

Presential Knowledge as the Basis of all Knowledge

The most complete type of knowledge—that is, presential knowledge—is the origin of all knowledge. That is to say, there is a faculty in human beings whose function is to “take a picture” so to speak of external objects. All of our mental forms which are recorded in our memory have been acquired by this faculty, and we may call it the faculty of imagination. Since this faculty has no independent existence, and is a part of the human soul, it can make a link to the external object and “take a picture” providing that the human soul makes an existential relation with that external object. Accordingly, the chief condition to create the mental form is its presential relation to the reality of the soul. This presential link allows the soul to know the reality through knowledge by presence. In fact, the faculty of imagination converts this presential knowledge to conceptual knowledge. In other words, when an object is present before a soul, the faculty of imagination creates a mental form of it (i.e. presential knowledge) and transfers it to the memory. Hence, the origin of all knowledge is knowledge by presence. In his *Kitab al-Masha‘ir*, Mulla Sadra says:

Knowledge is nothing but presence of existence without any obstacles. Every comprehension is realized due to some mode of abstraction

from matter and its obstacles. It is so, because matter is the source of privation and absence; since each part of the body is absent from the other components and absent from the totality, the totality becomes absent from the totality. Thus, the more intense is each form, in the sense of degree of purity from matter, the sounder is its presence to its inner-reality... (Mulla Sadra 1984: 63)

Moreover, our knowledge of these mental forms is actually presential knowledge and not conceptual. There is no mediation between the subject and the mental form, since to assume this would entail an infinite regress. That is to say, if our knowledge of mental forms is mediated through other forms, then ostensibly, the latter would also need to be mediated through yet other forms, ad infinitum. In this case, we would not have any knowledge at all.

Conclusion

Based on what was discussed, the best way to demonstrate the rationality of the belief in God is through this unmediated way—i.e., through self-knowledge, or more accurately, through knowledge by presence. This sort of knowledge shows that first, human beings can have a presential knowledge of God, and second, that they have an innate inclination towards God. One of the best arguments to show the truth of presential knowledge is, in fact, self-awareness. If we consider the awareness of the self, we know that we possess unmediated knowledge of ourselves. When I consider myself, I will find that I am truly aware of myself in such a way that I can never be absent of myself. If the subject ‘I’ is known to itself, and it is the knowing subject who knows itself immediately, then the knowing subject knows itself presentially. As we know ourselves by presence, we know our natural inclination towards the transcendent being by presence as well.

Another argument to show the truth of presential knowledge is empirical awareness. Awareness of one’s sensation and feelings is an example of one’s empirical awareness. One knows by presence that she/he is in pain. This awareness gives one a high degree of sense-certainty; when I am aware that I am in pain there is no way to doubt this awareness. This unmediated knowledge—which includes our knowledge of God—is not only basic in the sense that it does not come from other beliefs or sources, but it is also properly basic—i.e., it is acquired in a basic way and is accessible to human nature.

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