

Divine Knowledge in Islamic Philosophy

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The Illuminationist solution was further developed and elaborated by Mulla Sadra. According to Sohrevardi, Tusi, and Mulla Sadra, God's knowledge should not be conceived as forms inscribed in the divine essence, as it appears to be for Farabi and Ibn Sina. Sohrevardi and Tusi sometimes write of God's knowledge of things as if it is identical with the things themselves.

When Ghazali issued his Takfir (declaring one an apostate) of Ibn Sina and his followers in his book *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, the three main issues for which he condemned philosophy for its incompatibility with religious belief were:

- (1) the doctrine of the eternal past of the material world;
- (2) the doctrine of the limitations of divine knowledge; and
- (3) the denial of the corporeal resurrection.

Here, I would like to focus on the second of these issues.

According to the Muslim philosophers (by "the philosophers" Ghazali meant Farabi, Ibn Sina, and their followers, and this usage was continued in later texts in the Islamic world), knowledge can be divided into two kinds:

- (a) *'ilm al-huduri* or knowledge by presence, and
- (b) *'ilm al-husuli* or knowledge that is acquired, by which is meant representational knowledge, that is, knowledge acquired of things in the external world through their representation by concepts.

Knowledge by presence was understood to be the direct acquaintance that a knowing subject has of its own essence and states. In order to know anything about the objects outside the self, concepts are needed. In perception, for example, if one touches a piece of brocade and feels the roughness of the cloth, the feeling of the cloth makes an impression on the mind. This impression is a concept; and the

concept represents the cloth. In conceptual representation, the form of the cloth or some aspect thereof, in this case its roughness, is transferred from the cloth to the mind. The material of the cloth does not enter into the mind, which is immaterial, but the intellectual form of the brocade's roughness is both in the mind and in the cloth. It is through such intellectual forms that the knower and the known are united.

When "the philosophers" came to consider divine knowledge, they supposed that God has knowledge of His own essence and attributes through knowledge by presence. As for God's knowledge of His creatures, that would have to be by representational or conceptual knowledge, *'ilm al-husuli*. The crucial passage in this regard is in Book Eight, Chapter Six of the Metaphysics of Ibn Sina's *The Healing (Al-Shifa')*. (Curiously, Ibn Sina's major work on philosophy is called *The Healing*, while his major work on medicine is called *The Law*.) Ibn Sina writes: "He [God] would thus apprehend particular things inasmuch as they are universal – I mean, inasmuch as they have attributes."

This did not satisfy Ghazali, who argued that if God's knowledge extends to things outside Himself, the philosophers' doctrine of divine simplicity would be compromised, and if, like Ibn Sina, it was claimed that God's knowledge of things is due to their universal attributes within Him, then divine knowledge would not reach to the particular things themselves. Ghazali ends his discussion with the triumphant claim that from the dilemma he has posed for the philosophers, "there is no escape."

An escape, however, was found by Shaikh Ishraq, Shihab al-Din Yahya Sohrevardi, known as *al-maqtul*, the one who was killed. Sohrevardi accepts many of the criticisms of Ibn Sina's view of God's knowledge issued by Ghazali. His solution to the problem is the claim that God's knowledge is not representational. God does not know particular things because of the presence of abstract forms in the divine mind, or because of such forms in the intellects that proceed from Him by emanation. God's knowledge of all things, Sohrevardi claimed, is knowledge by presence. God is called "the Light of lights" (*Nur al-anwar*), and just as light illumines itself, God knows His own essence. His knowledge of particular things consists in their being illuminated by the divine light. There is no barrier or veil between God and things so that He should need some intellectual form to convey their knowledge to Him.

The solution formulated by Sohrevardi to the problem of divine knowledge of particulars shares several important features with the solution of Khwajah Nasir al-Din Tusi. Indeed, Sohrevardi and Tusi appear to be in agreement on so many important points that Mulla Sadra thought Tusi took his solution from Sohrevardi, although Tusi retained the idea that God's knowledge of things is through the mediation of the intellects.

The Illuminationist solution was further developed and elaborated by Mulla Sadra. According to Sohrevardi, Tusi, and Mulla Sadra, God's knowledge should not be conceived as forms inscribed in the divine essence, as it appears to be for Farabi and Ibn Sina. Sohrevardi and Tusi sometimes write of God's knowledge of things as if it is identical with the things themselves. If that were so, Mulla Sadra argues, there would be change in God's knowledge, since He has knowledge of changing things.

In his *Wisdom of the Throne*, Mulla Sadra claims that God's knowledge of particular material things consists in the immediate presence to God of their primordial essential realities, which are immaterial, to which the material particulars themselves are related like a shadow is related to its source. Here, Mulla Sadra takes a peripatetic view of the issue. In the *Asfar*, however, he offers a detailed account of the main solutions to the problem proposed by others, and he ultimately defends an idea like Sohrevardi's, that God knows particulars by presence.

According to Ibn Sina, knowledge consists of the presence of an immaterial thing for an immaterial thing; while for Sohrevardi and Mulla Sadra (in the *Asfar*), knowledge is the presence of anything for an immaterial thing. The effect of the cause that grants it existence is present to its cause. All particular existents have been granted their existence by God, and so all particular existents are present to God in divine knowledge by presence.

Indeed, according to Mulla Sadra's final view, acquired knowledge is denied for God altogether, for the introduction of forms in a divine "mind" would violate the doctrine of divine simplicity. God's knowledge of all things is through knowledge by presence.

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[Islamic Philosophy](#) [7]

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