



Characteristics of Islamic Philosophy

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Abstract: Islamic philosophy concerned with the matters such as the problem of unity and multiplicity, the relationship between God and the world. One of the most important principles in Islamic Philosophy is the principle of divinity. Islamic philosophy was largely concerned with defining and elaborating God's attributes. God's attributes were enumerated, but his essence was deemed to lie beyond human knowledge. Islamic philosophy reconciles revelation with intellect, knowledge with faith, and religion with philosophy, and to show that intellect and revelation does not contradict each other. So, in Islamic Philosophy, the results of revelation, intellect, faith, knowledge, and religion match and confirm each other.

What Is Islamic Philosophy?

What is philosophy? What is Islamic philosophy? Various definitions of philosophy are presented. The most accepted point in various definitions is that the philosophy is based on pure reason. And it is mentioned that the purpose of philosophy is to know the real world as much as human abilities. According to religious traditions and the history of religions, man has never lived without a prophet and, at all the times, religions or cultures left by prophets have provided a model or a program for people's lives. One of the most important lessons that were given by prophets has been the lesson of "thinking": thinking about the world, and the relation between man and the world and its wonderful phenomena. The prophets formed human thought and also taught the lessons of ethics and law in social relationships. Philosophy, or in more exact terms, *Sophia*, was the result of the prophets' teachings. So, Islamic Philosophy is a divine Philosophy because it is production of pure and practical reason the divine given and trust.

The core of Islamic philosophy is the love of wisdom and a quest for ultimate truth and as such

this is also the aim in Islamic religion. In other words, Islamic philosophy aims at a comprehensive understanding of being, knowledge, and values, and no such understanding can be complete if we ignore Islam. Obviously, Islam does not use revealed truths as premises in argumentation, but like secular philosophers, Islamists also appeal to pure reason. So Islamic philosophy insists on theoretical and practical aspects. Accordingly, God has two kinds of attributes, theoretical as knowing, practical as justice. Thus, the divine philosopher has rightness and trueness in thoughts as well as in practice and motivation.

The important question is whether or not there is Islamic philosophy? What is the relation between Islam and Philosophy? Islamic teachings and its rational culture that Muslim scholars introduced to society include philosophical thought, such as knowing God. Even before their familiarity with philosophy, these scholars had formulated a series of philosophical issues, developed some philosophical schools under the title of theology, and began to discuss and interview many of complex philosophical issues. Answering the original question of this section requires paying attention to the following:

- (1) Islam is a coherent religion; containing beliefs, moralities, rights, and jurisprudence.
- (2) The source of existence for Islam as a religion is the eternal divine will and knowledge.
- (3) Intellect and traditions are the epistemological sources of Islam. There are rational and traditional arguments for knowing what is the will of God. So, intellect and tradition are two sources of knowing and understanding in Islam.
- (4) The outlines of divine religions of all prophets, especially Ibrahamic religions, are the same. Every prophet confirmed the former one and explained about the next.

Verse 6 Sureh Al-Saf of the Qur'an states,

And [mention] when Jesus, the son of Mary, said, "O children of Israel, indeed I am the messenger of Allah to you confirming what came before me of the Torah and bringing good tidings of a messenger to come after me, whose name is Ahmad." But when he came to them with clear evidences, they said, "This is obvious magic."

وَإِذْ قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ يَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيَّ مِنَ التَّوْرَةِ
وَمُبَشِّرًا بِرَسُولٍ يَأْتِي مِنْ بَعْدِي اسْمُهُ أَحْمَدُ فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ قَالُوا هَذَا سِحْرٌ مُّبِينٌ (المف ٦)

And in Verse 48, Sureh Al-Maedeh of the Qur'an explains,

And we have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], the Book in truth, confirming that which preceded it of the Scripture and as a criterion over it. So judge between them by what Allah has revealed and do not follow their inclinations away from what has come to you of the truth. To each of you we prescribed a law and a method. Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation [united in religion], but [He intended] to test you in what He has given you; so race to [all that is] good. To Allah is your return all together and He will [then] inform you concerning that over which you used to differ.

وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَمُهَيِّمًا عَلَيْهِ فَاحْكُم بَيْنَهُمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلْنَا اللَّهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ عَمَّا جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْحَقِّ لِكُلِّ جَعَلْنَا مِنْكُمْ شُرْعَةً وَمِنْهَا جَا وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَكِنْ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ فِي مَا آتَاكُمْ فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ (المالده ٤٨)

From this we may conclude that philosophy and Islam share the same realm and domain. The former verse refers to Bayanat (clear evidence and proofs). It means a claim must be supported by proof and clear evidence. The latter refers to Qur'an and all revelation to prophets is based on the truth and real worlds, from God who is

the first cause of all existence. Thus, knowing the truth, reality of existence, using the proofs, and clear evidences are features of Islam as well as Islamic philosophy. So, we can claim both of them share the same domain.

Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy

I would like to introduce the transcendent philosophy of Mulla Sadra (see his major book *The Transcendent Philosophy Through the Four Intellectual Journeys of the Self*¹ as a perfect and the best model of Islamic Philosophy. Mulla Sadra's teachers and the impact of the Qur'an and *hadith*, planted the seeds for transcendent philosophy, the most important school in the history of Islamic philosophy and thought. Clearly an independent thought school his philosophical system comprises all central philosophical issues and is well equipped to solve even philosophical issues that might arise in future. At its surface, Mulla Sadra's philosophy is similar to peripatetic philosophy. In fact, one can say that the body of this philosophy is peripatetic, while its soul is illumination.²

Another important point is that Mulla Sadra holds a strong and logical belief on the Qur'an and *hadith*. His sources for philosophy were not merely confined to intellect, as he considered revelation as the most important, valid, and reliable source for knowledge.

¹ Mulla Sadra, - *al-Hikmat al-muta'aliyah fi'l-asfar al-'aqliyyah al-arba'ah*, ed. S. M. H. Tabatabāi, Tehran 1983 (Henceforth cited as *Asfar*). For a description of this book in English see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī and His Transcendent Theosophy*, Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy 1978, pp. 55-69.

² Illuminationist philosophy started in twelfth-century Persia, and has been an important force in Islamic—especially Persian—philosophy until today. It presents a critique of some of the leading ideas in Aristotelianism, as represented by the philosophy of Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and argues that many of its core distinctions are misguided. Illuminationists develop a view of reality where essence is more important than existence, and intuitive knowledge is more significant than scientific knowledge. They use the notion of light, as the name suggests, as a way of exploring the links between God (the Light of Lights) and his creation. The result is a view of the whole of reality as a continuum, with the physical world being an aspect of the divine. This sort of language proved to be very suggestive for mystical philosophers, and Illuminationism quickly became identified with Islamic mysticism.

As such, human intellect confirms revelation, and revelation supplements intellect. A religious person should believe in the role of intellect for understanding and discovering the truth. And accordingly, an intelligent and wise person should confirm and accept revelation.

Consequently, Mulla Sadra uses Qur'anic verses as part of his philosophical reasoning. He is inspired by the spirit of Qur'an in solving some philosophical complexities and problems as he tries to expand the dimensions of his philosophical ideas and thoughts with support from the *hadith* and *Sunna* (traditions) of the Holy Prophet (p.b.u.h) and his descendants. At the same time, he sometimes directly refers to some Qur'anic verses as evidence for his arguments and hereby demonstrating the rationality of Holy Qur'an. Anyway, the Qur'an was always an inspiring source for him. In this manner, he discovered some truths that others were not able to access.

The Qur'an contains the most profound verses and statements about theology, worldviews, and anthropology. It introduces many important philosophical topics, for example God's knowledge, Will and Attributes, the concepts of Divine Decree and Destiny, predestination, renunciation, life after death, resurrection, the Hereafter, the quality of the material world creation, the birth of prime matter, the end of world, and the annihilation of matter. Besides the Qur'an, Mulla Sadra has profoundly benefited also from peripatetic philosophy, Ishraqi philosophy, theology, and the traditions of the Prophet (p.b.u.h), Imam Ali (As), and the Prophet's descendants. He was influenced by Muhyaddin Ibn al-Arabi,³ Ibn-Sina,⁴

Aristotle, Plotinus, Suhrawardi,⁵ Nasir al-Din Tusi,⁶ Sadr al-Din, Qiyath al-Din Dashtaki,⁷ and Dawani.⁸

Mulla Sadra's perfect system of thought, comprise a coherent philosophical system. Ontology and the issues related to metaphysics have the greatest part of it. Then, the discussions are related to theology, psychology, eschatology, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, and logic, respectively have shared in this system. It is worthy to notice that Mulla Sadra put the love and aesthetics issues as a part of the theology. In his system, ontological issues are basic issues for others. Mulla Sadra's Philosophy contains many novelties and new achievements.

Finally, the most important purpose of Islamic philosophy is to know the real world, including God, nature, man and their relationship, knowing through reason, argument, and understanding. Islam also traces this purpose, because Islam has sought to know the truth and the real world, to know the existence of God and to know man's duties before God, his creator.

Islamic philosophy and Islam do overlap in their purpose. In addition, Islam has a lot of emphasis on understanding, reasoning, and knowledge. If the principles of Islam are not understood and proven by reason, they are not considered valid. There is a principle in Islam that says, whatever is judged by intellect, Islam accepts it and judges according to it. As such, there is no conflict between Islam as religion and Islamic philosophy. In other words, revelation and knowledge, intellect and faith do not contradict one another.

Reply to Charles E. Butterworth (pp. 65-69)

Mulla Sadra's philosophy is a synthesis of all Islamic philosophers' thoughts. It is the peak of perfection and the most comprehensive philosophy of Islam. Yet,

³ Ibn al-'Arabi was born in Murcia (in southeast Spain) in ah 560/ad 1164, and died in Damascus in ah 638/ad 1240. As a mystic he drew on the writings of Sufis, Islamic theologians, and philosophers to elaborate a complex theosophical system akin to that of Plotinus. Of several hundred works attributed to him the most famous are *al-Futuh al-makkiyya* (*The Meccan Illuminations*) and *Fusus al-hikam* (*The Bezels of Wisdom*).

⁴ Ibn Sina (Avicenna) is one of the foremost philosophers in the Medieval Hellenistic Islamic tradition that also includes al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd. His philosophical theory is a comprehensive, detailed and rationalistic account of the nature of God and Being, in which he finds a systematic place for the corporeal world, spirit, insight, and the varieties of logical thought.

⁵ Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (1154–1191) is considered the “master of illumination” (*shaykh al-ishraq*).

⁶ Nasir al-Din Tusi was born in the city of Tus in medieval Khorasan (now in north-eastern Iran) in the year 1201 and began his studies at an early age.

⁷ Ghuyath al-Din Mansur (1462–1543), Shiraz, Iran; leading figure of Dashtakid dynasty in Shiraz.

⁸ Jalal al-Din Muhammad ibn As'ad al-Dawani (or Dawwani) was a prominent philosopher and theologian, who became known to Western scholars through an English translation of his 1839 ethical treatise *Akhlaq-e Jalali* (*Jalalean Ethics*).

it is an independent school of thought with a unique system of its own. Mulla Sadra has established a philosophical system that comprises all philosophical problems; so that one can claim that this school, in the light of its basic principles, could efficiently solve even those peripheral problems that might arise in field of philosophy in future. His creative soul and scientific power and perfection allowed him to create a school that was independent of all philosophical, Gnostic, and theological schools while at the same time enjoying all their strengths and positive aspects.

Man's intellect confirms revelation, and revelation completes the intellect. One who has a religion and depends on revelation must accept the role of the intellect in discovering the truth; likewise, one who follows the intellect and wisdom, must confirm and accept revelation. Intuition and illumination can be demonstrated by means of argumentation and

reasoning and, as a result, grant universality to personal experiences. However, one must admit that the power of wisdom is limited, but intuition and love have no boundaries and can aid humans in attaining truth. The vastness and breadth of Mulla Sadra's views and the plurality of the origins of his thought granted freedoms for expanding the realm of philosophy. As a result, there is no trace of narrow-mindedness in his philosophy as can often be witnessed in other schools of philosophy. In Mulla Sadra's perfect system of thought, one can find all significant components and branches of philosophy, which, taken together, comprise a coherent philosophical system. Ontology and the issues related to metaphysics have the greatest share in this regard and, following them, the majority of discussions are related to theology, psychology, eschatology, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics and logic, respectively.