

Al-Ghazali Epistemology: A Philosophical Overview

Mansoor Alam
Research Scholar (PhD) Department of Philosophy,
AMU, Aligarh.

ABSTRACT

In Ghazalian epistemology, Reason and Intuition are the two main sources of human knowledge. We can recognize things with the help of reason or Aql as Ghazali says it is the basic apprehending faculty. Besides reason, he also considered that humans are also bestowed with intuition. Intuitional type of knowledge is the highest type of knowledge. By this knowledge one can comprehend the hidden secrets of the universe. The aim of this paper is to bring light on the different facets of Reason and Intuition with reference to Al Ghazali and meanwhile could his epistemology make a man free from all anxieties and doubts.

Keywords: Epistemology, Intuition, Reason, Sufi epistemology.

Introduction

Epistemology is one of the most importance branches of philosophy. That is concerned with various theories of knowledge. The term epistemology comes from the Greek epistēmē word which means “knowledge” or “Science” and the word logos which means “study of”. Epistemology is chiefly concerned with the aspects such as what is knowledge? What is the validity of knowledge? How can you learn knowledge? How do we know what we know? And so on. As a human being, each of us possesses a great deal of knowledge. We know about ourselves; we know about the world around us; we know about abstract concepts and ideas. Philosophers have often wondered where this knowledge ultimately comes from and how far it is valid or true. There are many source of knowledge and philosophers have different opinion of source of knowledge. Some put stress on reason, while others on sense-perception, and others on intuition.

Reason and Intuition (Aql and *Ilham*)

The word reason and intuition are the fundamental concerns of philosophy likewise Ghazali. It has been discussed since the time immemorial. It is the primary source of knowledge. Rationalists consider it as the compendium and source of all knowledge no doubt but there must

be the intermingling between the two according to Ghazali. He says there are various grades of knowledge. Intellect is an autonomous knowledge source. It has an important place in his Epistemology. In fact Ghazali demonstrates the western and Greek both and then defended by the very source of knowledge. Reason or Aql as Ghazali says the basic apprehending faculty. It is this faculty which differentiates man from the animals. While referring the Sufi term he distinguishes the mystical apprehension from Aql as demonstrative reason. Intellectual knowledge gives a composite knowledge. He says that intellectual knowledge as a prerequisite condition forgetting the intuitive knowledge, which is a way of sophistic life. He linked the intellectual knowledge with intuitive knowledge. Moreover according to Ghazali, “human soul is capable of attaining perfection, but to attain it, it has to pass through many stages of development, viz. sensuous (mahsusah), imaginative (mutakhayyiah), instinctive (mawhumat) rational (maqulat) and the divine (Ilahiyat). In the first place, man is like a moth, which has no memory, and beats time and against the candle. In the second stage, man is like a lower animal which, once beaten, runs away when he sees a stick. In the third stage, he resembles a higher animal, e.g. a horse which instinctively avoids a danger and flees away from a lion that is its natural enemy, but is not afraid of a camel. In the fourth stage, he transcends this limit also. He apprehends objects which are beyond the scope of his senses and can form general concepts underlying particular objects. In the fifth stage, he is able to apprehend the reality of spiritual things. This stage is reached by prophets and saints.”¹

The lower type of knowledge says Ghazali is faith which is common to all. Knowledge which is learned through deduction and reflection is called the higher knowledge. But intuitional type of knowledge is the highest type of knowledge. By this knowledge one can comprehend the hidden secrets of the universe, God especially his own self. This knowledge is a certitude which is the result of the light that God puts into the heart. Ghazali says, Intuition makes a man free from all anxieties and doubts.

Ghazali is of the opinion, that the world possesses two aspects for example the celestial world and the world of senses. Transcendental world is beyond the reach of sense perceptions. The physical world is the direct consequence of the transcendental world. Hence, “Reason is as free to move in the world of dominance as sense is in the physical world. In itself its proper sphere is the Realm celestial. But, for the perception and knowledge of the world of dominance and sense it is equipped with external and internal senses. But this equipment, while it is essential for the existence of this spiritual entity in the physical world,

becomes a veil between reason and the unseen world and a source of error in the apprehension of that world.”²

Intuition is dependent upon Divine will. Iqbal have the same pith and marrow. To him reason is the condition to become a human being, no doubt but intellect cannot reveal us the hidden secrets of the universe. Reason is mandatory but there must be intermingling between the two. However Iqbal criticized with the notion, “that thought and intuition are originally related and that thought must necessarily stimulate finitude and inconclusiveness because of its alliance with serial time.”³ Ghazali says the proper activity of reason is intuition. Thought is a form of activity which is imposed upon reason by the necessity of the sense. Thought and intuition are essentially interrelated. Ghazali is similar with that of Bergson says that intuition is the higher form of intellect when the intellect is freed from the narrowness of the senses. Hence according to Iqbal, “Both Kant and Ghazali failed to see that thought, in the very act of knowledge, passes beyond its own finitude. The finitudes of Nature are reciprocally exclusive. Not so the finitudes of thought which is, in its essential nature, incapable of limitation and cannot remain imprisoned in the narrow circuit of its own individuality. In the wide world beyond itself nothing is alien to it. It is its progressive participation in the life of the apparently alien that thought demolishes the walls of its finitude and enjoys its potential infinitude. Its movement becomes possible only because of the implicit presence in its finite individuality of the infinite, which keeps alive within it the flame of aspiration and sustains it in its endless pursuit. It is a mistake to regard thought as inconclusive, for it too, in its own way, is a greeting of the finite with the infinite.”⁴

Al Ghazali finally became mystical and realised that the validity of the mystical knowledge by an intellectual process is difficult to establish. He says: "I realise that the distinctive feature of mysticism cannot be grasped by study but only by an immediate experience, i.e. ecstasy and a moral change (dhawq literally means to taste).⁵ As such Ghazali want to say that the justification of mystical knowledge should not be sought through intellectual method. The justification of such knowledge can only be comprehended when one is involved in such an experience. Ghazali says, “I apprehend that mystics were the men who had real experience, not men of words. I had already progressed as far as possible by way of intellectual apprehension. What remained for me was not to be attained by oral instruction and study but only by immediate experience and by walking in the mystic path.”⁶ He holds that it is by the practice of a mystic way were the nature of things can be revealed

which he calls as immediate experience. There is similarity between Ghazali and Kantian approach regarding metaphysics. According to Kant by the help of pure reason one cannot acquire true knowledge about the nominal world. Ghazali too holds that the objects which exist in a realm which transcends human perception and reason. He comes to the point to realize the existence of God, soul, eternity of the world can be realized only through the intuition. He ultimately agreed that logic is not sufficient to comprehend. For him it is only intuitional knowledge, the base stone of all knowledge.

Ghazzali's view of Rationality as the Information Source

After questionable sensitivities, Ghazzali describes himself as thinking provisionally that he should trust only logical knowledge that belongs to essential truths (al-'aqliyyat). The core truths will be mathematical and logical truths.⁷ He says,

My reliance on sensible has also become untenable. Perhaps, therefore I can rely only on those rational data which belong to the category of primary truths, such as our asserting that 'Ten is more than three' and 'One and the same thing cannot be simultaneously affirmed and denied' and 'one and the same thing cannot be incipient eternal existent and non-existent, necessary and impossible.'⁸

Ghazzali found he secure in logical data at this point. The doubt of Ghazzali's sensitivities was the product of the life of the higher faculty, that is the judge of reason, who asked him another question, why then wouldn't there be another judge higher than that of the reason, that would make reason doubtful if manifested? The delicate people, too, did not point to the unlikely nature of that judge while it wasn't revealed.⁹ Therefore the inner debate within the Ghazzali mind on the authority of knowledge turned to the worst as it was reinforced by different forms of facts and claims that indicated the possibility of another sort of wisdom beyond explanation. The theory of contrast to the phenomena of dreams was first of all appealed to rationality, and reason, by this principle, must have understood that the relationship between that implied supra-rational state and our wake state is like the relationship of the waking state with our dreaming state, when the senses and reason are fully functional. When our conscious state deems our imagination and the belief in the dreaming state to be groundless, the supra-rational state judges our reasonable convictions equally.¹⁰ Therefore reliance of Ghazzali in the rational way of reaching knowledge was shaken too. Nevertheless, across all fields of understanding, he would not ignore the authority of rationality and considers that reason's dictates are true in the science of reasoning and

mathematics and in other aspects connected with encounters. As far as the spiritual universe is concerned, though, rationality cannot judge these with authority.

Furthermore in view of Ghazzali the reason requires the external support in at least two conditions, first is to give him freedom from the skepticism when it had assumed very dangerous proportions and secondly to lead a man and make him to realize that in the matters of religion and theology, there is no possibility of knowledge except through revelation and inspiration (al-Wahy Wal Ilham). Except in these two conditions, the reason is true scale rather safe and sound instrument for acquiring knowledge and information about all other matters, whose basis are the first rational principles and its way is vision apart from its ability to elaborate and explain things.¹¹

Ghazzali's views as a source of knowledge on intuition.

After finding both reason and sense-perception to be untrustworthy with regard to supra-rational knowledge, he turns to intuition and tries to base his knowledge on its foundation. None but a tension between rationally qualified and super-rational faculties that mounts a call for the former to accepting his very existence and the possibility for experiences which are linked with their various powers, such as those claimed by the Suffisians, the mysterious ill of Ghazzali's soul that lasted about 2 months. Their existence was called by the Sufis. This other faculty, which according to Ghazzali, is supra-logical or super-rational, is the intuitive faculty that has not yet evolved beyond the ability to theories and recognize the possibility of supprational experiences at that particular stage of Ghazzali's life. Later, however, he claimed he had been invested in his intense spiritual stage of life with the greater powers of the Faculty that revealed him countless spiritual mysteries. Those powers were called by Ghazzali Kashf and Dhawq (fruitional experience or immediate experience). The Ghazali problem was finding the right place within the whole scheme of knowledge, especially for the establishment of the right relationship between reason and intuition, for each of human abilities. Ghazzali's intellectual balance was healed not by rational arguments or logical evidence but by the effect of light (Nur) that God thrower into his womb, and again he accepted the reliability of rational daruriyeat data. However, in this new intellectual balance which was established, reason, in his own words Ghazzali, no longer occupied the dominant position of that light that God cast into his breast.¹²

One more important thing to add here is that Ghazzali was a great advocate of the revelational aspect of the divine knowledge. Revelation for Ghazzali was superior even to intuition. He even believes that there was the possibility of intuition going astray but the

revelation could never err. Revelation as per Ghazzali acts as a corrective force to intuition and without its help the later cannot stand on its own legs.¹³ Even we can see that while refuting the theories of Muslim philosophers, he mostly relied on the revelation. For example, when he refutes the philosophers Concept of eternity of world, he refuted it on the basis that world is not eternal that is what actually *Qur'an* mentions about. Furthermore whatever he says about God's knowledge of particulars and the resurrection of body or a number of similar other themes he relies on revelation and even says that whoever discusses these matters on the basis of reason while making revelation subordinate to it becomes a heretic or simply disbeliever.

References

1. Mustafa, Qausar. (1987). A dissertation under the titled *A critical study of al Ghazali's Epistemology*, Aligarh: Department of Philosophy AMU, Aligarh.
2. Umaruddin, M. (2007). *The Ethical Philosophy of Al-Ghazali*. New Delhi: Adam Publishers and distributors.
3. Mustafa Abu Sway,(1996). *Al-Ghazzaliyy A Study in Islamic Epistemology*, Kaula Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka.
4. Al-Ghazzali. (1980) *Al-Munqidh Min Al-Dalal* (Eng. Tr.) R. Joseph McCarthy Freedom And Fulfillment: An Annotated Translation of Al-Ghazali's *al-Munqidh Min al-Dalal* and other relevant works of Al-Ghazali. Boston: Twayne Publishers.
5. Rafiabadi, Hamid. Naseem. (2010). *A Brief Introduction to Islamic Epistemology Ilm Al Kalam and Muslim Philosophy*. Srinagar: City Book Centre.
6. Bakar, Osman. (1998). *Tawhid And Science*, Pakistan: Suhail Academy.
7. Sharif, M.M. (2017). *A History of Muslim Philosophy*. Vol. I, New Delhi: Adam Publishers and Distributers.