THE POSSIBILITY OF SENSE-DATA AND ITS TRUTH VALUE IN EARLY *KALĀM* LITERATURE

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Though there were plenty of debates on the valid source of knowledge; Is it reason or sense-data? Until Plato, apart from Sophist, no one doubted the possibility of knowledge. Along with Sophists, the debate took a new turn. The questions they asked were doubting the validity of acquired knowledge and the possibility of any knowledge at all. So, is there a possibility of attaining true knowledge about anything? In Islamic thought, such a problem of epistemology was first entertained by Muʻtazilite theologians. It could be said that one of the terms that formed the epistemological understanding of classic theologians and consequently shaped the form of classic Islamic thought is senses (*Ḥis, Ḥavās*). The subject of this study is to analyze the various motives laying under their epistemological attitude.

The present study is aimed to give a brief view of theological speculation on sense-data, how it came to be accepted as certain and became dogmatic truth for attaining true knowledge. It is argued that in the early period of theological formation, apart from *samʻiyyāt* (valid news) and *ʻaqliyāt* (sound reasoning), *ḥissiyāt* (senses) were considered an integral part of the epistemological triad. It can be seen that Islamic theology build its foundations on reason and revelation, for both sense-data plays an important role. If senses in themselves or the data collected by these senses are not valid enough, on what grounds then early *Kalām* creed establish its truth value. Afterwards, the study aims to question the reliability of the senses from a theological perspective.

Keywords: *Senses, Kalām, Sophists, dogmatic epistemology.*

Introduction

Today looking at the works on the creed that were prepared in the formative period of Islam, it could be said that Muslim theological literature has massive compendiums on the wide range of subjects. These creed works are usually compact summaries on which later on commentary works, treaties and glosses were written. It can be seen that the very first chapters of these creed works begin with epistemological theories. Therein, the definition of knowledge, types and valid sources of acquiring it are debated. The claim of the possibility of knowledge and how it could be acquired to reach God is drawn in polemical reflex to Sophists. Muslim *mutakallimūn* were the pioneers in the notion of accepting the outer world as real as it is. Theologians in these works coin the proposition that "things have unchanging (*thābit*) reality"[1] as an initial postulate for building the reliability of Islamic creed. It seems that by doing so, they tried very successfully to eliminate any chance of doubting the reality of the physical objects or outer world.[2] It is also pointed out that *mutakallimūn* criticized Sophist's view quite naively, establishing a dogmatic principle positing "Things have unchangeable (*thābit*) reality (*ḥaqā'iq*)".

The role of Sense-*Sensibilia*

The role of sense-data has primary importance in *Kalām* epistemological system. Māturīdī theologians defined knowledge (*'ilm*) as a quality by which one is able to think and express in a clear way.[3] Ash'arite theologians, in their expression of knowledge, state that "to know something as it is" or "it is the trust on what one acquires knowledge."[4] In Mu'tazilite epistemology, *'ilm* is understood as the confidence and belief (*I'tiqād*) about an object as it is.[5] Though Māturīdī theologians kept the definition vague, the emphasis on the object as a separate and definite reality could be seen in Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite epistemology.

Theologians once embracing the possibility of true knowledge demarked three possible sources for it.[6]

i. Intuitive / a priori (*Badīhī*)
ii. Perceptive (*Ḥissī*)
iii. Inductive/ deductive (*Istidlālī/ naẓarī*)

The above-mentioned classification of knowledge is from Abd al-

Qāhir al-Baghdadī (d.1037), the famous Sunni theologian and heresiographer. Even if some small variations could be noticed among theologians of different schools, their epistemology could be understood in primary categories of *Ḥissiyāt*, *sam'iyyāt* and *'Aqliyāt* successively.

The early *Kalām* scholars had a dispute in regard to the number of senses and how they function. The early period referenced to a range of three to seven[7], as far as human senses are concerned. However, with later generations, the dispute in the number of senses settled to five.[8] In creed work of Abū al-Muʿīn al-Nasafī (d.1115) and al-Baghdadi, we can see the final number of senses fixed to five. On the other hand, mystics circles, very much like Sophists, never relied on sense-data to be the only source of knowledge. In addition, they too questioned the epistemic value of sense-data. *Sūfīs*, unlike theologians, consider their subjective experiences and intuitions (*ilhām*) to be the valid source of knowledge.

Then, it could be said that the foundations of any possibility of knowledge rely on the senses and sense-data. For the human reason to process any data, it must be perceived on the first hand. This sensed data is collected by sense organs. Probably this is why Sense (*Ḥavās*) were defined as; "phenomenon that necessarily takes place in sense organ" It could be noticed that theologians mention senses with an additional attribute of "*Salīma*," meaning sound sense. Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm al-Naẓẓām (d. 835), a theologian and philosopher, expresses it as data that necessarily get collected by healthy human sense organs and perceived by the soul (*Nafs*). Once sense-data is collected by the mind, only then rational faculty can make a judgement about it. The rational faculty (*'aql*) or *'Aqliyāt* is thus a later function.

The perceiving Self

It is interesting that classical theologians relied on the concept of human being to interpret the sources and value of true knowledge. For instance, Muʿtazilite of Baghdad, especially al-Nazzam, had a dualist image of human being. He believed that sense organs collect sensory data and the *nafs* (soul/Anima) perceives it and makes judgements. Unless there is any physical obstacle or biological impediment, such as a disease, the sense organs transmit sensory data necessarily. The soul collects the data, process it and make decisions on its behalf.

On the other hand, Muʿtazilite of Baṣra, such as Qaḍi ʿAbd al-Jabbar (d.1025), would use the word *Mudrik* instead of *nafs*.[9] For Qaḍi the perceiver is nothing other than the human body itself. It could be said

that the Baṣran school gradually amalgamated the demarcated lines of an object in the outer world and the imprisoned soul in the body, by making body itself the object for perceiver of its perceptions. It could be argued that Muslim theologians and Sophist had a very different approach to sense-data and how it is perceived by any person (*mudrik*).

On the other hand, an overlapping position could be seen among Sophists and Muslim *Ṣūfīs*, since both have their reservations, and approach sense-data with caution. Muslim *Ṣūfīs* rejected the idea of an individual perceptive soul (*nafs al mudrik*) and considered the self to be a mere construct. In this way, not only they objected the authenticity of sense-data or reasoning faculty of mind but the very person who perceived these faculties in him. Sophists, alongside *Ṣūfīs*, doubt the formal epistemological structure of theological paradigm. In such a diverse opinion, it is claimed that theologians, by creating polemical rhetoric, tried to humiliate if not convince these different approaches under one issue "those who doubt the possibility of true knowledge" on the authority of senses and reason.[10]

In this process of perception, if there is any error in sense-data that must be re-evaluated, the reason holds a belief about an object on first hand. In other words, sense-data provides the initial bases for reason/ mind. The reason, by experimentation and *naẓar*, checks the validity of sense data. In such a two-way process, it becomes possible to attain true knowledge about any object.

Both founding pillars of *Kalām*, i.e., reason and revelation, rely on the possibility of true sense-data. Sophists, on the other hand, by denying the possibility of any valid knowledge through sense-data, also refute the truth value of revelation and reason.[11]

In contrast, theologians, who established their belief system on the difference between subject and object, i.e., observer and the observed object, makes a clear distinction between word and its signified meaning. Muslim *Ṣūfīs* believed in only one true Self, the Real, apart from eternal God any other thing is an illusion in the broader scheme of things. It can be said that theologians felt it as their moral and religious obligation to not only take the outer world as real but to consider the world as perceived to be the way to find God.

Knowledge in actuality

While defining knowledge, Mu'tazilite added a new element in it

which was later adopted by theological orthodoxy: Tranquility of mind (*sukūn un-Nafs*). Theologians with this modification closed any agnostic and sceptic approaches to the theological realm. It implies that the human mind only gets rid of doubts and false speculations once a firm belief is established; belief in objects as real in per se. On the other hand, Muslim *Ṣūfī* epistemology does not indulge in finding a stable human foundation for establishing any truth value. For *Ṣūfī*, the dynamic life and a universe in constant flux is the reality. Theologians, unlike *Ṣūfīs*, tried to found firm grounds in the outer world and believed it to be as real as they are themselves. Perhaps this could explain the factors involved in the axiom of 'things have unchanging reality." We can see this axiom eventually becoming the founding principle of *Kalām* theory of knowledge and dogmatic principle with later generations.

Here a perplexing question comes to mind: if the knowledge about anything should be measured by "tranquility of mind," then probably Sophists and *Ṣūfīs* may have it too. In other words, if these above mentioned three different approaches insist on the state of the subject (perceiver) then what makes them different from each other? It seems that Mu'tazilite, right after defining their understanding of knowledge, takes into account the state of perceiver as the real leap to build their theological arguments. Such that all features and aspects of knowledge were put into one structural integrity to serve a practical purpose. Sophists while questioning the essential nature of things, considering them being relative to most extent, theologians took a rather practical stance. By demarking the lines of knowledge, knowable and truth value of any data, credo evolved into the rigid epistemological structure. The *Ṣūfīs*, by refuting such epistemological structure, said no to the formal methodology.

Sophists that were refuted categorically

The persistence of theologians with regard to their claim that objects have stable reality perhaps has its origin in their trust in God, who created these senses for a believer to grasp this reality as it is. If the observed world or human senses are not a valid source of knowledge, then on what grounds could theology get its foundations?

Three different groups were subject to polemic under Sophists,

'Indiyyah

These were those who considered the reality of any object to be

nothing other than the belief of observer.[12] To theologians, this group was undermining the objective reality in favour of subjective attitude towards it. This subjective truth could lead to the relativist grounds and consequently, no one could make a sole truth claim. This would create epistemological chaos where either no one will claim to have sole truth or everyone will argue on his or her own personal feelings to be valid. Theological structures are based on the truth claims and hence considered such an approach to be a heretic. This creates epistemic chaos and social disorder on a wider scale.

'Inādiyyah

They denied any objective or ontological reality and considered it all to be a mere dream. This understanding creates no space for the reliability of sense-data nor reason of any sort and as life and whatever there is, is a meaningless dream, they could be called nihilist in contemporary terms. Baghdadi's solution for such people is to confront them with pain and induce torture on them.[13] Baghdadī states that their belongings and property should be confiscated. He ensures it to be the only possible way for them to understand eventually how real the world, self and life are.

Lā-adriyya

The third group in this regard are those who do not think that human reason is capable enough to grasp the vastness of the universe or comprehend God. They claimed that an object can never be truly known in its essence or as it is. Theological texts also criticize these agnostics for paving their way to lust and hedonism. Māturīdī argues that no matter how much they would deny any objective reality, they would never involve in a declining business nor they will prefer intentional pain over pleasure. They would act in everyday life knowing the difference between what is beneficent and otherwise. So, their denial of objective reality or ultimate truth is mere conjecture and arrogance.[14]

The methodological problems

As it could be noticed these categories are vague and truly based on a generalization, for there were people who lied in one or more categories at the same time. However, it could be understood that such

a group had the general principle of Protagoras "man is the measure of all things." Baghdadi fears that this relativistic approach could never lay the ground for any epistemological understanding.[15] Because the doubt would only create more doubt. Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944) explains the situation in the following words: As for those who opt for the view that there is no knowledge other than personal convictions and belief, whatever he says will be real. Such a person shall be beaten with a hard blow and shall be punished by cessation of his body parts.[16] The provocative argumentations and somehow subjugated anecdotes against Sophists and Skeptics can be found in classic *Kalām* literature. Another method is used as rhetoric (*jadal*), such as the opponent in the debate (*munaẓarah*), which seems to have embraced the general criticism of the Sophists, then criticizes himself by asserting the exact opposite of what was said to the opponent.[17] Such methods were launched to reduce any unwanted speculation to absurdity.

It could be seen quite evidently that *mutakallimūn* neither considered these allegations seriously nor did they engage in epistemological pursuit. For theological mindset, each and everything has its certain position in the frame of reference. No two ontologies, i.e., God and man could be replaced in cosmic / theological structure. A subject and the objects of the outer world each have their own functions and reality. By the same token, they argue scripture (text) does not have infinite meaning or hidden interpretations. It is the very way mystics and *Ṣūfīs* did criticize theological reasoning (*naẓar*) and dialectical method. From a theological point of view whatever lies beyond the frame of the reason is ambiguous and should be avoided. Since it has a well-formed structure and hence was functioning adequately for the community of believers.[18]

Likewise, *Muʿtazilīte* polymath Qaḍi makes a clear distinction between the personal belief of a man and outer reality. He claims that subjective belief cannot alter the outer factual reality. If so, people would have changed their beliefs for the sake of changing objective reality. The ultimate Real God, his existence and attributes would also be dependent or an individual's beliefs.[19] However, such a conclusion is necessarily false, for belief cannot change reality.

Dogmatic certainty

It is evident that any approach that does not regard human sensual reality of any epistemological consideration also exceed linguistic

boundaries in interpreting a text. Because there are no proper linguistic or theological rules that must be followed. Theologians resisted such attempts and refuted them immediately, which provoked gnostic (*'irfānī*) interpretations of the physical and textual world. It could be considered as the reason for their firm belief in sense perception and outer reality because it supported their textual understanding and vice versa.

In initial discussions of knowledge those who speculated the authenticity of sense-data were charged with heresy, isolation and infidelity. This shows that the theory of knowledge is a matter of faith. There could be seen three ways of dealing with such people who deny the reliability of senses.[20] To use rhetoric and dialectical reasoning, to inflict pain on them, or to reduce their claim in absurdity *Reductio ad absurdum*. It does not seem plausible that theologians perceived human reason or sense-data to be delivering the whole picture of the Real. They were not concerned with speculation that could lead them into such questions. On the other hand, they relied on the ordinary human realm of sense perception and with experience of this very limited sense-data of the outer word, derived the proves for a creator. They, in fact, believed that the creator does not indulge in useless work.

Regardless of reducing their theoretical questions to absurdity, theologians have taken Sophists as competent opponents and their arguments so seriously that they have made their first refutation to their impossibility of true knowledge. Apart from propagating possibility of knowledge they did not accept any source other than reason, valid news and sound sense-data. In fact, as we have observed treaties on belief and 'ilm consider belief in sense-data being a part of essentials of faith or perhaps even prior to it. Since for confirmation of one's faith, one has to have soundly functioning senses. On the other hand, a common expression quoted from *Ṣūfī* sources rejects the whole epistemological foundation claiming 'the world is a dream', therefore, no reality of any sort could be attained. This leads to "ontological ambiguity of all things".[21] In this regard, even though Muslim *Ṣūfīs* accepted dreams, inspirations or intuitions as a valid source of knowledge, *mutakallimūn* strongly rejected it, for it is a very subjective experience.

Whereas Van Ess pointed out that, more than Sophists, the actual target of theological polemics was gnostic Shi'ite groups, who also considered subjective inspirations and intuitions of a spiritual leader (*imāms*) to be valid. Sometimes, any command of *imām* can actually abrogate the verses of Qur'ān. *Ṣūfīs* also considered inspiration as a source of

knowledge and rejected the standard set of senses and measurements to be very much relative. Any such attempt was strongly condemned by theologians, because it will create ambiguity in the most important articles of life and faith, such as God, hereafter and objective morality. The whole effort was made to create a standard set of rules in law as well as in faith, such a standard structure would help to live a life under God's command and rule of law.

It seems plausible to assume that the theological debates were limited to refuting opponents by mere rhetoric or with harsh jargons, rather than seeking the understanding of their opponents. Another reason for such a response lies in their strong belief in Aristotelian logic. Following Aristotelian laws of thought, an object either exists or does not exist. True knowledge is either possible or impossible; rejection of one possibility necessitates the acceptance of the other. Any third possibility would create fallacy. Therefore, they believed that a refutation to any sophist's negative attitude towards the possibility of knowledge and reality would be sufficient to prove the reality of the outer world.[22] For instance, Baghdadi asks a rhetorical question to those who deny the possibility of knowledge; Is there a truth (*ḥaqīqat*) in the absence of truth? If they give an affirmative answer, Baghdadi states they would have accepted some truth.[23] There are many other examples of argumentations which clearly explain that sceptics doubted in speculative and theoretical realm of possibilities. On the other hand, for theologians, their speculations had no end in themselves and would just result in doubts, confusions and chaos. Another reason for it could be their trust in God. Since God had created the physical world including man, He had given man sound senses and reason to grasp the reality and admire God's creation. God, in Mu'tazilite view, does not deceive man, neither does it engage in useless folly (*'abath*).

In *Kalām* rational attitude there lies another axiom which is consistently used by creating inductive analogy from the physical world to Divine realm: *Istidlāl al Ghayb al-Shāhid*. For *Kalām*, the rejection of any knowledge about the visible world also creates an impossibility of knowing about the unseen world, endangering the belief in God. The way to know about the subjects belonging to the unseen and unknown world, such as about God and hereafter, is only possible by belief in the reality of the outer world. The unchangeable reality of the outer world creates the firm ground for theologians to initiate a debate of the existence of God. Otherwise, no common epistemological ground can be attained for

discussion. By positing such a key preposition, they tried not only to keep a stable image of the outer world but also the formal system made by *Kalām* sciences.

Another reason lying underneath such an attitude is politics. In the reign of Abbasid, with the initiation of translation movement, theologians wrote intensive refutations against Manicheist, Sophists, Dualists along with their polemics against *Gulat- Shia*, *Bāṭini* and Gnostics. The evolution of these refutations into belief axioms shows that theologians accepted and validated the existing political authority. Another example is the axiom proclaiming "an evil and oppressing ruler is better than no ruler at all".[24] Likewise, a *fāsiq* leader (*imām*) shall be preferred over no *imām* at all.

Difference in approach

The Moroccan critic and theologian Abed al-Jabri, who is well known for his work on religious epistemological structures, expresses this scenario in terms of dialectics (*bayān*). Theologians in the system have some basic characteristics; a) word bounds the signified meaning and text could not have infinite meanings, b) *Kalām* constructs its cosmology on atomism, thereby atom (*jauhar*) is unchangeable (*thābit*). c) it is possible to give a religious verdict by creating a similar analogy for any new situation. Now, in retrospect, it could be said that such a formative period shows the need for form and pattern. On contrary to *Bayān*, there is *'irfanī* (gnostic) epistemology that considers the possibility of a meaning beyond the linguistic capacity of any word, intuitional and imaginary becomes as real as anything.[25]

Theologian tries to define God in terms of his ontology and state that it is different from any physical matter. In *Kalām*, the Transcendent God has rules, moral commands and cosmic system by which he rules the universe. Whereas in *Ṣūfī* paradigm they reject the negative theology of *Mu'tazilah* and argue God is an eternal presence which cannot be conceived by reason. On this road, *Ṣūfīs* try to get rid of any ties to the physical world, to the realm of senses and devote themselves to the only True God. According to al-Jabri, whether it is gnostic Shi'ite i.e. *Bāṭinī Isma'īlī* or *Ṣūfīs*, all have a common understanding that reason is a veil.[26] A hindrance in the experience of the Real, sound reason and individual self-perception creates an impediment in union with it.

In conclusion, theologians and creed formers insist that the world we live in is real, as a human individual self that perceives pain and

suffers. Within this real world, the aim was to set a standard pattern from rituals to epistemology, to make the life of believer un-chaotic and meaningful. In a way, their aim has been to find practical solutions for the real world. For this reason, they tried to present a well-formed structure in all fields of human life. They did not make the slightest compromise to any approach that tried to get out of this structure. This is why scholastic theology seems to be conservative for they are keepers of tradition. Sophists and *Ṣūfīs* in this way have a totally opposite epistemological stance. This contrast between the theologians and Sophists/ *Ṣūfīs* can be seen as a representation of order and chaos, authority and anarchy or as structure and deconstruction present in a mega-structure of Islamic tradition.

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