

The Metaphysics of Knowledge: A Qur'anic Perspective [1]

Bilgi Metafizigi: Kur'ani Bir Perspektif

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Abstract: Granted that human knowledge is, in fact, possible, I attempt to answer the philosophical question i.e., how the metaphysical conditions that make human knowledge possible by reference to the Qur'anic meta-epistemological intuitions. To achieve this, I first examine some philosophical attempts, Kant's approach, in particular, offering an answer to the question "what makes knowledge possible?" from the transcendental point of view. Then, similarly, I propose that the Qur'anic meta-epistemological intuitions about the relation between human beings and the Divine can shed light on the problem of how human knowledge is, in fact, possible from a Qur'anic perspective.

Keywords: God, the Qur'an, human knowledge, Kant, meta-epistemology, transcendental arguments.

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The question how something can be possible at all has been rightly considered crucial for a satisfactory philosophical analysis. This type of questions, which are sometimes formulated in terms of “how-possible questions” (Cassam, 2007: 1), deserve to be at the bedrock of any philosophical inquiry. The question “what makes knowledge possible?” has drawn philosophical interest and, at this point, much struggle has been going on for a defence against scepticism. I do not intend to rehearse this debate here (for such a debate see Luper-Foy, 1987), I shall however assume that knowledge is in fact possible. Instead, I shall dwell upon the question as to which metaphysical conditions or elements can be ultimately responsible for making knowledge possible. In so doing, I shall first consider some philosophical attempts to explain the possibility of knowledge, notably Kant’s view of ‘unifying consciousness’ and the possibility-argument. Then, I shall try to display to what extent these philosophical convictions about the possibility of knowledge can be justified on the grounds of the Qur’anic meta-epistemological intuitions. The argument proposed here can be viewed as an instance of the so-called ‘transcendental arguments’, where the existence of the God (*Allab*) is considered to be a metaphysical (ontological) condition for the possibility of knowledge in the final analysis.

By ‘the metaphysics of knowledge’ I thus understand the metaphysical (ontological) conditions that are necessary and sufficient for the occurrence of knowledge, the ‘human knowledge’ in particular. Although a question such as “what makes knowledge and, for that matter, human knowledge possible?” is intimately related to the traditional epistemological question of “what is the source of knowledge?”, the former nonetheless seems to be, to some extent, conceptually prior and therefore more fundamental. A satisfactory answer to the latter may certainly shed light on the former, but it can hardly yield a complete explanation for the possibility of knowledge *as such*. Nonetheless, certain intuitions about the possibility of knowledge might be somewhat *implicit* to the traditional debate on the source and nature of knowledge. This is not, however, to say that epistemological questions about the source and nature of knowledge are either trivial or beside the point; on the contrary, a satisfactory explanation for the possibility of knowledge seem to need to deal



with the problem of the (ultimate) “source of knowledge”.

It may, on the other hand, seem difficult to give an exhaustive account for the origins of human knowledge inasmuch as such an attempt will have to presuppose the possibility of, so to speak, a complete and infallible self-mapping of the human recognitional capacities. But this (if possible) is a rather difficult (transcendental) task for the epistemic subjects who are both finite and fallible. Broadly speaking, there have been two conflicting traditional approaches in the Western philosophy at this point: empiricism and rationalism. For the empiricist, knowledge basically draws on sensory or perceptual experience where an epistemic justification can only have an empirical ground. Whereas for the rationalist they are the truths of reason or rational intuitions that are at the bedrock of our knowledge, hence a proper epistemic justification is not possible without referring to certain self-evident truths, that is, the set of necessary truths characterised as basic. Arguably, each approach can be defended on some philosophical grounds and indeed both might have their own merits, however what matters for us here is the very possibility of either empiricism or rationalism. To put otherwise, even if one grants that *a priori* or *a posteriori* knowledge is indeed possible, the question what makes this possible cries for an explanation: What makes empirical knowledge possible? Or, by the same token, why should there be any truth of reason at all?

Although it might be thought that due attention was not paid to the meta-epistemological questions in the Modern period, one has to mention Kant who is sometimes considered as “the patron saint of how-possible questions in philosophy” (Cassam, 2007: vi). Kant attempted to found the possibility of knowledge on some “transcendental grounds” in that he took the unifying mechanism of the human consciousness or understanding as a necessary condition for the possibility of knowledge. The definite character of the transcendental arguments is that they take “one thing (X)” to be “a necessary condition for the possibility of something else (\mathcal{Y}), so that (it is said) the latter cannot obtain without the former. In suggesting that X is a condition for \mathcal{Y} in this way, this claim is supposed to be metaphysical and a priori...” (Stern, 1999: 3). Kant was primarily concerned with the possibility of empirical knowledge and he



maintained that such a possibility has to be based, in an *a priori* manner, on “pure intuition” and “consciousness”:

In this way alone is any knowledge possible. We are conscious *a priori* of the complete identity of the self in respect of all representations which can ever belong to our knowledge, as being a necessary condition of the possibility of all representations. For in me they can represent something only in so far as they belong with all others to one consciousness, and therefore must be at least capable of being so connected. This principle holds *a priori*, and may be called the transcendental principle of the *unity* of all that is manifold in our representations, and consequently also in intuition. (1953: 141-142/ A 116).

What is underlined here is the idea that the unity of experiential knowledge can be obtained only if there is a unifying consciousness, and this is done in terms of certain *a priori* operations embedded in ‘imagination’ or ‘pure understanding’. Kant thus maintains that “the principle of the necessary unity of pure (productive) synthesis of imagination, prior to apperception, is the ground of the possibility of all knowledge, especially experience” (Kant, 1953: 143/ A 118). And the ontological ground of such a unifying consciousness is the “abiding and unchanging ‘I’ ” (Kant, 1953: 146/ A 123). He thus takes all this to be stemming from the nature of the human soul as he clearly states that “pure imagination which conditions all *a priori* knowledge, is thus one of the fundamental faculties of the human soul” (Kant, 1953: 146/ A 124).

Evidently, if successful, such an argument shows that there are or should be some prior conditions that are conceptually necessary for the possibility of empirical knowledge. This might indeed be true, but there remain some further questions which are equally crucial for giving a satisfactory explanation of the possibility of knowledge in the final analysis. Why should there be such epistemic subjects with a unifying consciousness or imagination? Kant takes this to be an outcome or a function of the human soul, but, then, the question once again is: why should there be the ‘human soul’ with such a particular nature at all?

These questions seem to be perfectly justified, given the contingencies and restrictions about the nature and existence of the human beings. In fact, in his pre-critical philosophy, Kant seems to have come close to such a point when he attempted to account for the ground of *possibilities*



in general, and this led him to think that this could be argument for the existence of God. Thus, in *The Only Possible Argument in Support of the Existence of God*, he argues for the existence of a necessary being, i.e., God on the existence of bare possibilities. He starts with the observation that “to say that there is a possibility and yet nothing real is self-contradictory. For if nothing exists, then nothing which could be thought is given either, and we contradict ourselves if we still wish to say that something is possible.” (Kant, 1992: 123-124/ 2:78). From this, he concludes that possibilities must be grounded in some actual being whose existence is necessary: “All possibility presupposes something actual in and through which all that can be thought is given. Accordingly, there is a certain reality, the cancellation of which would itself cancel all internal possibility whatever. But that, the cancellation of which eradicates all possibility is absolutely necessary. Therefore, something exists absolutely necessarily.” (Kant, 1992: 127/ 2:83).

As a matter of fact, to explain the possibility of knowledge by reference to a metaphysical realm has a long philosophical background. Plato tried to articulate such a possibility on the grounds of the eternal Forms with which the immortal human soul was somehow acquainted and this led him to think that knowledge is simply an outcome of remembering or recollection. The whole discussion of the soul and its relation to *nous* since at least Plato is verily related to the possibility of knowledge. “Thus”, Gerson writes, “the immortality of the soul is the immortality of *nous*. But human *nous* is not divine *nous*, basically because human noetic activity is imperfect. There is, therefore, a reason for postulating a divine *nous*...” (Gerson, 1990: 80). Similar accounts were developed under the influence of Platonism and the distinctive character of these approaches is, one might say, to postulate a universal mind or intellect (*nous*) which cognizes the eternal Forms or Intelligibles and thus secures the eternal possibility and existence of *truth* and *knowledge*; and this is perhaps best exemplified in Plotinus’ metaphysics of *Nous* and the Intelligibles (See Gerson, 1990: 195-205). Ibn Sīnā ascribed a similar role to the Active Intellect (*al-Aql al-Faal*) which is already actual and is therefore causally responsible for making the potential rationality of the human soul actual (Goodman, 1992: 135-136).



To be sure, it is a common theistic intuition to think that God, as the Ultimate Being, is conceptually or explanatorily prior to anything whose existence can be explained. That is, it is of conceptual necessity that if *X* is *the* ultimate being then *X* is such that nothing else can be explained independently of *X*. (Cf. Plantinga, 1980: 1; Leftow, 1990: 584-585). Kant seems to have followed a similar ontological intuition when he argued that there can be no more than one necessary being:

Since the necessary being contains the ultimate real ground of all other possibilities, it follows that every other thing is only possible in so far as it is given through the necessary being as its ground. Accordingly, every other thing can only occur as a consequence of that necessary being. Thus the possibility and the existence of all other things are dependent on it. But something, which itself dependent, does not contain the ultimate real ground of all possibility; it is therefore, not absolutely necessary. As a consequence, it is not possible for several things to be absolutely necessary (Kant, 1992: 128/2:83-84).

Needless to say, by such an ‘absolutely necessary’ being, Kant has God in mind. And it is not difficult to conceive how an extension of such an argument for the possibility of knowledge might proceed. Granted that the existence of the human epistemic subjects is not necessary, it will follow that the human knowledge is possible only if there is an ultimate ground of knowledge which in turn entails the existence of a necessary being with due epistemic properties. The best candidate for such a unique necessary being seems to be the God of traditional theism, who is omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent etc. Indeed, this fact was already well-underlined by Leibniz when he said that “in God is the source not only of existence but also of essences, in so far as they are real, that is of all the reality there is in possibility. This is because the understanding of God is the region of eternal truths or of the ideas on which they depend, and because without him there would be nothing real in the possibilities- not only nothing in existent, but also nothing possible” (Leibniz, 1973: 185, § 43).

The philosophical considerations about the possibility of knowledge we have seen thus far seem to have underlined the role of reason, which is the seat of various *a priori* concepts, categories or intuitions. Here one



can presume that pure empirical accounts, if they explain the very possibility of empirical knowledge at all, fail to provide a satisfactory explanation for the existence of various instances of knowledge (logical, mathematical, moral etc.). Given the fact that these *a priori* elements that are necessary for the human knowledge are beyond the empirical realm, one may rightly conclude with Goodman that “even if one does not trace the activity of the human rational intellect *ontologically* to back to God, ...*epistemologically* one might find such a journey necessary” (Goodman, 1992: 141). However it seems difficult to see how our epistemological considerations can be independent from our ontological intuitions at this point. Provided that the possibility of knowledge requires an ontological ground, the idea of reason needs to be associated with the idea of the soul inasmuch as the former is taken to be somewhat grounded in the latter. The soul is equally considered to be crucial for the possibility of knowledge because, as aforementioned, it is the ontological condition for the possibility of an ‘unchanging self’ and ‘unifying consciousness’ and therefore of a ‘unifying self-consciousness’. And finally, granted that the human soul/ mind cannot diminish the (epistemic) possibilities due to its restrictions or imperfections, a divine mind or God is postulated for the explanation of possibilities and knowledge, and also for actualising the potential nature of the human soul/ mind. The ontological and epistemological considerations therefore are interwoven because the possibility of knowledge is explained by reference to the human soul and a divine mind or God. As a matter of fact, the possibility of knowledge along these lines was neatly underlined by Locke:

There was a time then, when there was no knowing Being, and when Knowledge began to be; or else, there has been also *a knowing Being from Eternity*. If it be said, there was a time when no Being had any Knowledge, when the eternal Being was void of all Understanding. I reply, that then it was impossible there should ever have been any Knowledge. It being as impossible, that Things wholly void of Knowledge, and operating blindly, and without any Perception, should produce a knowing Being, as it is impossible, that a Triangle should make it self three Angles bigger than two right ones. For it is repugnant to the *Idea* of senseless Matter, that it should put into it self Sense, Perception, and Knowledge, as it is repugnant to the *Idea* of a



Triangle, that it should put into it self greater Angles than two right ones. (Locke, 1975: 620-21/IV, X, § 5).

It is not my intention to elaborate further on these philosophical intuitions. The question before us is whether these philosophical considerations can be defended in conjunction with the Qur'anic intuitions about the possibility of knowledge. To this end, I would like to concentrate on the following questions: To what extent such a philosophical account might be taken to be either compatible with or presupposed by the Qur'an? What can be the Qur'anic contribution to the metaphysics of knowledge in this regard? Answering these questions will reveal the meta-epistemological scheme in the Qur'an and also throw the light on the philosophical grounding of the possibility of the human knowledge.

To start with, although the Qur'an (Q.) does not directly attribute properties such as *understanding* and *consciousness* to God (*Allab*), it certainly attributes *knowledge* to Him. Thus it clearly underlines the point that God is not only a knower but that also that He is knowledge is perfect such that nothing escapes from His knowledge; in a word, He knows everything. (See Q. 6:59, 20:98, 57:3). If so, there seems to be no harm in ascribing God the epistemic properties that are necessary for making Him *the* perfect epistemic subject (i.e., the perfect knower). In the Qur'an, epistemic properties are also attributed to the human beings, they are thus praised for their epistemic successes and condemned for their epistemic failures (see for instance Q. 10:100, 39:9). It seems to me that these Qur'anic reflections clearly entail that there is an *epistemic overlapping* between God and man in that both can be predicated of epistemic properties and it is my contention that such an entailment has a crucial role for our understanding of the Qur'anic metaphysics of knowledge. For, it reveals not only that Allah is the ultimate source of knowledge as the all-knowing being but also sheds light on the possibility of an epistemic accessibility between God and man. Certainly, this does not mean that there is an identity relation between the divine knowledge and the human knowledge. There are good reasons for thinking that the divine knowledge differs from the human knowledge extensionally since it involves many truths that are not possible for the human beings to cover as they are epistemically both finite and fallible. It also differs, so to speak,



intensionally inasmuch it is, unlike human knowledge, not acquired or inferential. Nonetheless the epistemic overlapping in question suffices to show that, from the Qur'anic viewpoint, there is a realistic epistemic ground between God and man. In other words, the Qur'an not only indicates that God as omniscient being is the ultimate ground or source of knowledge, it also presupposes that there is an overlapping epistemic ground which makes such a realist epistemic accessibility possible.

As for the question of the ontological ground of such an epistemic possibility, it is at this point where, I think, the Qur'anic response can really be conducive to meta-epistemology inasmuch as it reveals the ontological ground necessary for a realist and rationalist understanding of knowledge. Thus, the Qur'an holds that the soul has its Divine origin as it clearly states that God has 'breathed into' man from His spirit or soul (Q. 15: 29). On this account, therefore, the possibility of the human knowledge is answered to its Divine origin. And such an epistemic mechanism is not conceived in terms of an impersonal or a non-voluntary effect of a universal mind (in terms of emanation, for instance) on the human mind but rather of the voluntary activity of God inasmuch as He has taught and thus bestowed upon human beings the due epistemic capacity of understanding/ conceiving and speech (Q. 55: 4, Q. 2: 3).

Thus, there seem to be good reasons for thinking that the Qur'an too presupposes a similar meta-epistemological background insofar as it includes the metaphysical (ontological) elements necessary for the possibility of knowledge. Presumably, therefore, to consider the existence and nature of the soul as a precondition for knowledge and associate it with the divine source is not alien to the Muslim intellectual tradition. Thus, for instance, al-Ghazālī had no hesitation in thinking that God and the soul are similar in terms of being invisible, indivisible, non-extensional etc. He thus highlighted the epistemic nature of the soul inasmuch as it has an *a priori* ability to know itself (that is, self-consciousness) and to perceive of truth. This is because the soul is, so to speak, a mirror reflection of Divine light, which enables it to perceive itself and other things due to its rational nature (see al-Ghazālī, 1998: 6-26; Reçber, 2003: 73-86).¹

¹ The idea that it pertains to the nature of the soul or self to be aware of itself (self-conscious) is also essential to Ibn Sīnā's celebrated the "Flying Man" argument (see



Given these considerations, one may wonder what might be the further (philosophical as well as theological) implications of such a meta-epistemological outlook. Considering that God is the ultimate ground of being as well as knowledge, it seems to entail both an ontological and epistemological realism. That is to say, since both ontological and epistemological possibilities rooted in God, they exist independently of human beings who are contingent epistemic subjects. A prevailing problem facing epistemological realism has been the question how one can substantiate a correspondence relation that is supposed to take place between a mental representation and an extra-mental fact. Given the foregoing meta-epistemological considerations, it seems that one can satisfactorily answer this question by saying that since God is the source of both being and knowledge (and therefore the ultimate source of the human epistemic capabilities) there is a common ontological ground to secure such a correspondence. Such a realism can thus sidestep the problems that are often raised on the sceptics.

Again, given that the conditions which make knowledge possible are transcendent to the human minds and their contingent and finite epistemic capacities, such a meta-epistemological viewpoint will be able to circumvent the disadvantages of antirealism with respect to truth inasmuch as it considers truth to be independent of the epistemic activity of the human beings but not of God (See Plantinga, 1982: 47-70). And finally, one might think, it entails rationalism insofar as it gives a higher or prior role to reason (which is rooted in the soul) in the formation of the human epistemic structure. This in turn explains why the so-called a realistic “God’s Eye point of view”, which is denied to be possible for us by some anti-realist approaches (see Putnam, 1981: 49-50; and for a defence of a theistic perspective see Murray, 79-96)², can in fact be partially available to us. Presumably, this is what makes a realistic (cognitive) epistemic accessibility -and therefore a revelation- possible between God and man.

Marmura, 1986: 383-395; Black, 2008: 63-87).

² This is what Putnam’s anti-realism or ‘internal realism’ denies to be possible for us. See Putnam, 1981: 10. For a defence of the ‘God’s Eye point of view’ from a theistic perspective, see Murray, 2002: 79-96.



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Öz: Bu makalede insan bilgisinin gerçekte mümkün olduğu düşüncesinden hareketle insan bilgisini mümkün kılan koşulların neler olduğu felsefi sorununu Kur'an'ın meta-epistemolojik sezgilerine referansla yanıtlamaya çalışıyorum. Bunun için, evvela "insan bilgisini mümkün kılan nedir?" sorusunu yanıtlamaya çalışan bazı felsefi yaklaşımları, özellikle de Kant'ın yaklaşımını değerlendikten sonra, benzer bir şekilde, Kur'an'ın Tanrı ve insan ilişkisine dair meta-epistemolojik sezgilerinin insan bilgisinin imkânı sorusuna ışık tutacağını düşünüyorum.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tanrı, Kur'an, insan bilgisi, Kant, meta-epistemoloji, aşkın-sal argümanlar.

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