

KNOWLEDGE: A GHAZALIAN PERSPECTIVE**Jan Mohammad Lone****Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy,
Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh****ABSTRACT**

Al-Ghazali is one of the most accomplished epistemologists in the history of world philosophy. In "Tahafut al-Falasifah", he has powerfully brought-out the incoherence and un-tenability of the basic philosophical positions advanced by such philosophers as; Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Al-Farabi, Ibn-Sina etc. Before 17th century Descartes, Al-Ghazali originally launched his famous method of doubt and before 18th century David Hume, Al-Ghazali underlined the non-necessitarian character of causal connection and inductive generalization. Al-Ghazali as an integral epistemologist accepts the role of sense experience or perception, reason and intuition in the origin and development of human knowledge. While perception furnishes us the knowledge of phenomenal world, reason makes an all-important contribution in the development of logico-mathematical as well as natural sciences. However, reason or perception has no role to play in giving us any certainty with regard to Ultimate Metaphysical Reality or God. It is only intuition which provides us absolute certainty with regard to existence of God. The Revelation vouchsafed to the Prophets is the highest intuitive knowledge. Only Prophets, Mystics and Spiritual Seekers attain affirmative certainty. Philosophers, at best, can attain negative certainty. In view of the above considerations, the present paper will emphasize on re-visiting and re-appropriating the epistemological perspective of Al-Ghazali with the view to withstanding the skeptical, relativistic and nihilistic onslaught advanced by contemporary Euro-American postmodernists.

Keywords: Al-Ghazali, Epistemology, Perception, Reason, Intuition and Certainty.

Introduction

Epistemology or theory of knowledge is a very old practice in the field of philosophy and plays a key role (Salam, et al., 2014). Different philosophers view the term epistemology in their own perspective(s) as it focuses on nature, scope and the origin of knowledge. Gradually, there have been grand discourses and disagreements found amid the epistemologists about the analysis and sources of knowledge. Islamic philosophy has also dealt widely with the issue(s) of epistemology and the means accessible to human beings to acquire authentic knowledge (Azram, 2011). Meanwhile, here it is not my endeavour to deal with the vast subject of Islamic epistemology and how each school of Islamic philosophy has dealt with relation amid faith and reason, reason and intuition, and human knowledge etc. Rather, my purpose is to deal with the understandings of knowledge in Ghazalian perspective. Al-Ghazali has an insatiable thirst for truth right from his teeny years. In *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, Al-Ghazali points out how ardently he was committed to search for truth and how he felt appalled as spectacle at credulity of common people conforming to the dogmas of orthodoxy without reason and rhyme. He also points out how distressingly he felt at the phenomenon of philosophical, theological and creedal disagreement amongst mankind. Such a widely prevalent disagreement galvanized Al-Ghazali to undertake an unstoppable search for certain knowledge – a knowledge that is impervious to nay skeptical onslaught or challenge, that is unassailable (Al-Ghazali, 1980).

Methodology:

This paper is primarily intended to comprehend Al-Ghazali's theory of knowledge. The purpose is to demonstrate, identify, re-evaluate and, finally, find out the epistemological perspective(s) in Ghazalian thesis. I inquisition(ed) a search for Al-Ghazali's contemplation on the theoretical and practical aspects of knowledge which embraced a contemplation of Ghazalian perspective(s) on knowledge. This study uses rational content investigation, directed by a hermeneutic approach, analytic approach and phenomenological approach. I used qualitative research methods because they are predominantly effectual for investigating and elucidating how things were/are.

Ghazalian Epistemology:

Al-Ghazali, as an epistemologist cannot be pigeonholed into any exclusive club. He negotiates several epistemological frame-works such as Empiricism, Rationalism, Authoritarianism, Revelationism, Intuitionism etc. He is an epistemological integralist. He accepts the inferential validity of various sources of knowledge such as Perception, Reason (inductive, deductive inference), Authority or Testimony, Revelation and Intuition. Al-Ghazali seems to be implicitly committed to various zones or Jurisdictions of knowledge, each zone or jurisdiction of knowledge appropriating a relevant or corresponding source of knowledge. For example, perception or sense experience is the basic source of knowledge with reference to physical or external world. Reason plays a very crucial role in the attainment of scientific knowledge. However, its role is all-important in the jurisdiction of logical and mathematical knowledge. It is reason that derives logical and mathematical entailments or implications. Reason also is our capacity to grasp or master theoretical or abstract sciences. It also makes appropriate inductions and deductions in the domain of historical sciences. It is through reason that our understanding or cognition has multiplicative even exponential growth. When we understand something, that understanding becomes the basis of other possible understandings. This process is never-ending and ever-expanding. We go on adding fresh cognitions to our previous understandings and, in the process, frontiers of knowledge are perennially extended by recourse to reason (Faris, 1962, p. 231).

Al-Ghazali has also laid great emphasis on the study of the Quran and the Traditions of the Prophet, for they are important and authentic sources of theological, spiritual and moral knowledge. The knowledge gained by the study of the Quranic revelations and Traditions of the Prophet, is morally purificatory and spiritually therapeutic. However, the Quranic revelations and Prophetic traditions need to be unquestionably appropriated. Such an appropriation can be grounded only on faith. The knowledge gained through Quranic verses and Traditions of the Prophet are initiated or ordained by Allah. They descend on the Prophet as involuntarily as heat and light of the stars is received by the planets. They are unalloyed blessings of Allah and cannot be appropriated on demand by anyone of us. Such knowledge is a function of Divine Grace (Smith, 1983).

Apart from perception, reason and authority of the Quranic revelations and Prophetic Traditions, intuition or mystic experience plays an important role in the Ghazalian epistemology. For Al-Ghazali, intuition or mystic experience is the most vital and crucial source of knowledge and realization. The propositions with regard to Ultimate Reality can never be validated by theological, philosophical, scientific or experimental methods. Only intuition or mystical experience can validate such propositions in the

ultimate depths of our soul. The soul has the capacity to reflect the light of God and attain to direct vision of the truth provided it is liberated from the worldly distractions. It is intuition or mystical experience which can furnish us the highest Certitude. It is through intuition or mystical experience that we can dissolve our doubts and hesitations. Our mystical experience is rooted in our soul. In view of the same, intuition or mystical experience plays a foundational role in the process of acquirement of our knowledge. Our soul is the ultimate abode of our knowledge. All knowledge has been inscribed in human soul at the very time of creation. This primordial knowledge can lapse into forgetfulness in the face of our overwhelming passions. However, such a knowledge can never completely eclipse. Once we purge our soul of the impact of passion, it returns to its primordial state. All knowledge potentially exists in human soul. We need to liberate our soul from imperfections or worldly engagements. It is through the purification of soul that we can cultivate mystical experience. The purification of soul can be cultivated by disengaging ourselves from the imperatives of power, property and pleasure. The purification of soul bestows on us sufficient light guiding us to authentic God realization. The realization through mystical experience guides us to spiritual perfection. The realization of God leads to love of God and love of God leads to realization of God. In fact, love of God and realization of God are inextricably amalgamated (Karim, 1993).

Al-Ghazali was not only a voracious reader but also a prolific writer. He had delved deep into the intellectual movements or trends of 11th century Arabia, Khorasan and Central Asia. In the light of his investigations and studies, Al-Ghazali divided seekers of truth or knowledge into four categories: (1) Theologians, (2) Ta'limites or Batinites, (3) Philosophers, and (4) Mystics. He evaluated all the four movements in the light of both his convictions as well as rational and critical criteria. Firstly, Al-Ghazali did not carry out any strong criticism of theologians for Al-Ghazali was a trained theologian and in his early years an ardent advocate of theological approach. However, in course of time, Al-Ghazali became dissatisfied with the scholastic method of theologians. He came to realize that the theological, dialectical or scholastic method can never impart to us certainty of convictions or intellectual certainty. Such theological doctrines as God, Prophet-hood or Day of Judgment etc., while ineliminably ingrained in him, he certainly wanted to appropriate these doctrines by recourse to intuitive or mystical experience if not on rational grounds. Secondly, Al-Ghazali was thoroughly dissatisfied with the teachings as well as methodology of Ismailia and Batinia sects, called Ta'limites across western and central parts of Asia. The followers of the Batinite sects were asked to completely renounce the reason for human beings can attain to complete truth by fully submitting to the infallibility of Imams. Such an approach was unacceptable to Al-Ghazali and he dubbed Ta'limites to be authoritarians. Thirdly, Al-Ghazali was profoundly critical of the assumptions, predilections and presuppositions of philosophers ranging from Greek Masters such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to their Muslim disciples such as Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina (Sharif, 2001).

Al-Ghazali's quest for certitude vortexed him into the whirlpool of skepticism. Al-Ghazali was an empiricist, rationalist and intuitionist. However, he could not accept the evidence of sense-experience for it can so often deceive us. There are many phenomenal features which cannot be accurately quantified or qualified by the sense-experience. For example, stars seem to be so small and yet they are actually giant astronomical bodies millions of times larger than our earth; a rope seems to be like a serpent; we perceive water in a desert from a distance and yet it turns out that there is no water at all. It is through rational and scientific method that illusions induced in us by sense-experience, are cleared-up. Reason does provide us a higher knowledge in comparison to the knowledge provided to us by sense-experience. It plays a very important role in the development of logical, mathematical and natural sciences. However, how can we be

sure that knowledge provided to us through reason is absolute and unqualified? How can we be sure that there is no higher source of knowledge which can annul rational knowledge, just as perceptual knowledge can be nullified by reason so can rational knowledge be qualified by some higher faculty of understanding. How can we be sure that reason is an infallible source of knowledge? Epistemologically speaking, it is possible that this world we are living in is a dreamland, and when we die, things may come to appear differently to us. There may be an order of reality radically or substantially different from our spatiotemporal order. Such a world may not be available to men of normal consciousness. Such an order might be available to the mystics and the prophets. There can be a higher apprehension than that of rational apprehension. Such an apprehension might be vouchsafed to the inspiration of a mystic or revelation of a Prophet (Ibid., p. 589). And this apprehension can never be a function of philosophization or argumentation; one can experience such apprehension only by recourse to divine grace. Al-Ghazali's doubts were finally dissolved in the all-pervasive illumination of the divine light.

Epilogue:

However, we cannot accept that mystical disclosures or intuitive divulgements constitute absolute or final knowledge. Human knowledge is an ongoing multi-functional struggle which is never final and ever revocable. The multi-complex Being is too ineffable or inscrutable to be mystically or propositionally available to human understanding or interpretation. In view of the same Al-Ghazali's appropriation of mystical experience as the ultimate condition, ultimate source and ultimate justification of knowledge is too simplistic to be globally appropriate by epistemological community in our times ó be they rationalists, empiricists, philosophers of science, hermeneuticists, analytical philosophers, phenomenologists or post-modernists etc. Historically speaking, mystics or intuitionists have come from various backgrounds, religious, traditions and cultures. In view of the same, they have been nurtured into their respective predilections, prejudices and presuppositions. Their respective histories, traditions and cultures have shaped up their hearts, minds and styles of thinking. Their mystical or spiritual journeys must have started with their respective culturally conditioned consciousness. None of them can claim to have started with a clean slate. Each mystic, to begin with, imbibes a set of beliefs and values. Each mystic starts with a set of assumptions and orientations before appropriating certain practices and exercises for a certain period of time culminating into a mystical experience revealing to him what is ultimately Real. Every mystic is related to some Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Taoist, Shintoist, Jewish, Christian or Islamic order. All mystical orders prescribe certain practices, exercises and rituals which are to be carried out under the supervision of a master or mentor. The respective mentors orientate their disciples according to assumptions and postulates of their respective orders. The mystical orders are intimately linked to their respective religious traditions. Accordingly, the mystical experiences of the up-coming disciples are doctored or mentored. They are oriented to confirm what they are directed to do. In view of the same, a Buddhist mystic has a flashlight of Nirvana in his mystical experience, a Christian mystic confirms the validity of Trinity in his mystical experience, a follower of Sankara experiences the dissolution of his Atman into Parmatmam, a follower of Ibn Arabi experiences the truth of doctrine of Wahdat al-Wujud, etc. There are, as well, mystics who experienced that mystical experience cannot provide us any authentic disclosure of Ultimate Reality. No mystical experience can resolve any theological or philosophical disagreement. Every mystical experience itself is the product of social conditioning. In the light of these critical considerations, Al-Ghazali cannot go in for appropriation of mystical experience as the wholesale source of the revelation of Ultimate Reality, Truth or Knowledge

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