



## The Materiality of Knowledge in the Epistemology of Islamic Theologians<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Research Article



The process of self-awareness and awareness of the surrounding world for Muslim scholars has been categorized into divisions such as experiential and acquired awareness. However, the ontology of awareness, meaning the discussion of whether awareness is immaterial or material, as well as the material or immaterial nature of the origin and end of awareness, has been a particularly challenging topic among Muslim theologians. Some Muslim scholars, denying the existence of a factor beyond the human body for his movement and life, considered both awareness and the process of awareness-formation in humans and the factor-shaping awareness in humans to be within the same body. They engaged in critiquing the perspectives and foundations of philosophers, especially Avicenna on this matter and, utilizing specific principles in their philosophical physicalist psychology, regarded awareness as a material entity. In this discussion, after examining the foundations of this group of Muslim theologians regarding the material nature of awareness and their criticisms of considering awareness as immaterial, we will focus on the philosophical and epistemological consequences arising from the materialistic view of awareness in their thought.

### Keywords

Knowledge, Islamic theology, philosophy, materiality, soul.

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## Introduction

The problem of knowledge has been considered by Muslim thinkers using different words and terms. In most of the works of Muslim theologians, Knowledge has been referred to as “knowledge” and extensively debated in full detail through such issues as the ontology of knowledge, material and extra-material properties of knowledge, typology of knowledge, and the relation of knowledge to the knower and the known (the subject and the object). Some have also discussed the issue of knowledge under the title of “intellection” and reflected upon such issues as the nature of intellection, relationship of intellection with the soul and mental states and faculties, as well as the relationship between the intellect, the intellectual, and the intellected from a philosophical-theological point of departure. It is indeed needless to state that the problem of Knowledge or knowledge or intellection cannot be approached without paying sufficient attention to the issues addressed in the philosophical science of the soul. In fact, to state the matter otherwise, a Muslim theologian or philosopher’s understanding of the nature of the human soul and its materiality or immateriality will influence his perspective of the nature of knowledge, the ontology of knowledge and Knowledge, and the relationship between knowledge and the surrounding world. Thus, Muslim theologians on the problem of Knowledge can be classified under two general camps: dualists who believe in a dual identity for a human being and his states. This group mostly includes Muslim philosophers. The second camp represents the materialists or physicalists who believe in a physicalist identity for the human being and his soul. This group is majorly composed of Muslim theologians as well as some traditionalists. Accordingly, those who believe in an extra-material and spiritual nature for the human soul or his intellection faculty insist on the immaterial nature of human Knowledge while those who believe in the material origin of human movement, life, and different activities side by a materialist perspective on the problem of Knowledge and human knowledge. The latter camp does not consider knowledge to be an immaterial phenomenon; rather, it approaches it as a material phenomenon or process that occurs in a human being. In other words, this group of Muslim theologians does not believe in the extra-material origin or source of human knowledge and Knowledge. In the present essay, we will seek to study the problem of knowledge or Knowledge from the point of view of Muslim theologians who believe in the materiality of knowledge and the process of its formation in a human being. Paying attention to the context and time of the formation of such a belief among Muslim theologians

along with the major reasons for the emergence of the belief in the materiality of human knowledge and Knowledge will provide a better perspective of this problem in the thought of Muslim theologians which is discussed in different parts of this essay.

### **The background of the problem of consciousness in Islamic theology**

The discussion of knowledge or Knowledge and its nature among Muslim theologians originates from and owes its continuation mostly to the debate of the nature of “Divine knowledge” and God’s awareness of all creatures, beings, and even non-beings. However, it was not so that all historical debates in this regard are summarized in divine knowledge; because, the theological method, in contrast with the method of traditionalists and the method of philosophers, would have required the issue of “knowledge or Knowledge ” and the process of its formation to be discussed from an epistemological point of view. This led the theologians to pursue understanding the ideas of Greek philosophers, understanding the need for logic, and finally, coming up with their own solutions for the evaluation of the validity of propositions and the quality of the process of formation of knowledge in human beings and its different types. When they faced Sophists, like the philosophers, they would have defended “knowledge”, and embarked upon the path of reason relying on a realism that seeks a perennial truth. Of course, Muslim theologians differ from the philosophers in taking a series of presuppositions into account which had precipitated in their mind as religious persons from the Qur’an, Prophetic traditions, and the common notions among their fellow believers. In fact, they sought to prove these presuppositions but their proof was not “Prophetic tradition”; rather, it was through a rational method. One can easily understand the depth of the trouble they would find themselves in facing the pre-demonstrated presupposition and the rational method for distinguishing the correct from the incorrect. But since they believed in those realities and presuppositions, they had to tackle these challenges regardless of the troubles they would face. The solution was intellection, numerous mental efforts, the development of different theses for solving a problem, and of course, in some cases, coming up with new solutions relying on rational discourses that could have brought about certain problems for them. In general, theology, though solving a number of problems for religious people, to some extent, causes certain cumbersome troubles and leads them to darker corridors of confusion. These confusions mostly date back to the early Islamic Era (third to fifth

centuries of Hijri) when prominent theologians rose to fame. Later the Islamic world accepted diverse beliefs and continued to live on them. In fact, paganism and atheism were no longer a threat to them as it was in the third century of Hijri which is known as the century of diversity. The roots of thinking had also been dried out to a considerable extent. From the sixth century onward, a dogmatic form of theology came to be accepted, and if there was any change it would have been in its becoming philosophical in the school of Hilli within the framework of the thoughts of Khajjah Nasir al-Din Tusi and Allamah Hilli, as well as some later Ash'arite theologians who focused on Fakhri Razi's ideas. Thus, since the sixth century onwards, there remained no sign of the diversity of the Mu'tazilite and theological schools of the fourth and fifth centuries. This was indeed an outcome of the elimination of Mu'tazilite theology.

### **The definition of consciousness from the point of view of theologians**

Keeping with the Mu'tazilite, Qadi Abd al-Jabbar, the Shiite theologians of the Baghdad School including Sharif Murtada and Sheikh Tusi, considered the word "ma'rifah [episteme]" to be equivalent to knowledge and perspicacity in the sense of what calms down the soul and brings about peace in the heart (Tusi, 1983, p. 190; 13; Baridi, 1970, p. 22; Moqri Neyshaburi, 2006, p. 122). Qadi Abd al-Jabbar has defined knowledge as follows: "Knowledge is the sense which brings about peace in the soul of the knower as regards to what it deals with" and then added that the aforementioned peace in the soul is realized when a person's belief corresponds to reality: "this sense does not occur as described but when the belief of the knower is particularly correspondent to what happens on the ground" (Abd al-Jabbar, n.d., vol. 12, p. 13). He has introduced this definition of knowledge as the chosen definition by his mentor Abu Abdullah Basri.

Seyyed Murtada has offered a similar definition of knowledge as follows: Knowledge is what brings about peace in the soul regarding its object of concern and this occurs only when belief corresponds to reality (Musawi, 2011, p. 154; Musawi, 2010, p. 42).

But Khajjah Nasir al-Din Tusi and Allamah Hilli have considered "knowledge" to be a self-evident notion that does not require any definition and is not essentially definable (Tusi, 1407, p. 169). Having reviewed some of the definitions offered by past masters regarding knowledge, Allamah Hilli critically assesses each one of them. Among these definitions, one can refer to

the definition offered by the Shiite theologians of Baghdad who have defined it as “a belief that causes peace in the soul”. According to Allamah Hilli, this definition is not exclusive enough to prevent irrelevant cases from being included and consequently, it is not acceptable (Hilli, 2001, p. 328). The reason for the latter criticism lies in the fact that imitation and absolute ignorance, like knowledge, are beliefs associated with peace of the soul though knowledge essentially and necessarily requires peace of the soul, while imitation and absolute ignorance do not. Thus, imitation and absolute ignorance make their way into the aforementioned definition of knowledge while they are certainly not an extension of knowledge (Tusi, 1986, p. 82).

In response to the aforementioned definition of knowledge offered by the theologians of the Baghdad School, philosophers as well as the followers of philosophical theology have suggested an alternative definition. According to these scholars, knowledge in its general sense (which includes categorical judgment correspondent to reality, suspicion, and absolute ignorance), consists of the acquisition of the known form in the intellection faculty of the knower. According to this interpretation, knowledge represents the mental form abstracted from the known which is identical with and correspondent to it. Here, of course, there are other interpretations. For example, some other scholars have considered knowledge to be the relationship between the knower and the known. Allamah Hilli has described knowledge as a real property that is associated with the relationship that exists between the knower and the known (Hilli, 2001, p. 78). To state the matter otherwise, knowledge is not the relation itself—because the relationship is mental while knowledge is an objective and real property that independently exists in the outside world though it is always being thought of in relation to another thing as knowledge is always knowledge of something. Having quoted the aforementioned definition of knowledge, Fadil Miqdad proceeds to critically review the words of Allamah Hilli. He argues that it is not sound to offer a definition of knowledge after considering it a self-evident notion.

### **The intellect**

The “intellect” is one of the keywords in the domain of epistemology which has undergone major semantic transformations as a result of a new reading of Avicennan philosophy based on Shiite theology. The intellect in the Baghdad School of Shiite theology has been used in the sense of “a particular collection of necessary (evident) knowledge”. In his valuable treatise titled *Al-Muqaddamah fi al-Kalam* [Introduction to theology] which is devoted to

the explanation of theological terms according to his own stance, Sheikh Tusi has paid attention to the definition of intellect. The intellect, Tusi states, consists of a collection of such pieces of knowledge as the knowledge of necessary prescriptions, for example, returning entrusted things, thanking the owner of bounties, fairness, as well as the knowledge of the evilness of evil acts such as lying, oppression, etc., as well as the knowledge of the goodness of many cherished deeds such as righteousness, doing good, etc. In the words of Sheikh Tusi, these pieces of knowledge are referred to as the “intellect” [‘aql], because they are similar to *‘eqāl* or the shackle that is used for controlling a camel. There are two points of similarity: firstly, whoever owns them refuses to commit rationally evil acts and would never stop doing the prescribed deeds just as the shackle does not allow the camel to act as he wishes; secondly, the realization of discursive or acquired knowledge relies on this group of knowledge. In other words, the latter collection of knowledge comes before acquired knowledge and their fixing is contingent upon this part of knowledge as the fixing of a camel depends on a shackle (Tusi, 1983, p. 23).

Abu Salah Halabi (447 A.H.) another follower of the Shiite School of Baghdad in his definition of the intellect has stressed that the “intellect” refers to a collection of knowledge that is an act of God [in a human being]. That is, it is being necessarily acquired by man (Halabi, 1984, p. 129). In this definition, it is clearly stated that the intellect stands for a collection of knowledge that is necessary and created by God in a human being.

Likewise, Qutb al-Din Neyshaburi has considered the intellect to be a special collection of knowledge of ten types. These ten types of knowledge which are referred to as the intellect include a relatively wide range of necessary knowledge. They contain human knowledge of his own essence, properties, and states, knowledge of the fact that a physical body cannot be in two places at the same time, as well as some empirical knowledge like the inflammability of cotton upon its exposure to fire, glass being broken when hit by a stone, and the fact that an action is dependent upon and belongs to an agent—for instance, writing belongs to the writer and a building belongs to the builder (Tusi, 1983, p. 12), and finally, the knowledge of the viciousness of rational evils and the necessity of the prescribed actions. Such knowledge is considered to be the perfection of the intellect, etc. (Moqri Neyshaburi, 1993, pp. 91-92).

The definition offered by the Shiite theologians of the Baghdad School is clearly the same definition that has been suggested in the Mu‘tazilite School of Basra. Ibn Matwiyah defines intellect as follows: “The intellect consists of a

collection of knowledge which is named so when it is acquired and if a piece of this collection is individually considered, it is not referred to with the same appellation” (Abd al-Jabbar, 2009, vol. 2, p. 602). Moreover, he has enumerated different types of knowledge, the collection of which is referred to as the intellect in full detail. He believes that an individual becomes competent to be held as a legally obligated person who has already acquired the intellect in the aforementioned sense (a collection of certain types of knowledge). For without this set of knowledge, a human being is not able to know the Lord. In a nutshell, according to the Shiite theologians of the Baghdad School, the “intellect” represents a particular set of necessary and primary human knowledge which is almost tantamount to the level of the habitual intellect that was considered one of the levels of the theoretical intellect later in philosophy and the school of philosophical theology.

### Reason

“*Dalīl*” [reason] lexically means leader and guide. This word is used in the theological texts of the Shiite School of Baghdad as an equivalent of the word “signifier” [daal]. Furthermore, in a secondary metaphorical sense, this term equivocally refers to signification. In other words, it refers to something the knowledge of which requires the knowledge of something else provided that its agent intends to argue of it (Tusi, 1983, p. 23). Qadi Saaid Baridi in his definition of the word “reason”, has referred to these two applications (Saaid Baridi, 1970, p. 19).

Therefore, in the Baghdad School, “reason” either refers to the “signifier” or to the person who expresses the signification (Hilli, 2010, vol. 1, p. 50). Reason in its absolute sense stands for something of sound argument provided that its agent intends to argue for it. But this word in the school of philosophical theology has been used in a particular sense of “something the knowledge of which requires the knowledge of something else”. Broadly speaking, it refers to a “certain type of a posteriori argument in which one seeks to know the cause through the effect” (Hilli, 2007, pp. 94-95).

In his explanation of these two senses, Allamah Hilli stipulates that the word “reason” simultaneously refers to both the following senses:

1) Something the knowledge of which endorses the existence of the signified, that is, something any contemplation of which leads to the acquisition of knowledge of something else.

2) Argument of the cause through the effect (Hilli, 2007, p. 44).

To state the matter otherwise, in the theological texts of the school of

philosophical theology, the same classification is found which has been presented in the science of logic and philosophy for the typology of arguments. Accordingly, an argument has been classified into two general categories:

**1) A priori argument:** An argument for the effect based on the effect, for example, an argument for infection based on fever.

**2) A Posteriori Argument:** this type of argument itself is of two types:

i) The argument of a cause through an effect, for example, the argument for infection based on fever. This is called “reason”.

ii) The argument for an effect based on another effect (Hilli, 2010, p. 172).

Therefore, “reason” has found a particular sense after the philosophical turn in Shiite theology, and, in some cases, it is used to refer to the notion of an argument for the cause based on the effect.

### **Knowledge and science of the soul in Islamic theology**

It is said that two groups believe in the materiality of the soul:

- Muslim theologians: This group considers just the human soul to be immaterial and regards the rest of his existence as material.
- Materialists: This group denies the existence of all immaterial entities including the soul.

Traditionalists have also been considered among the deniers of the immateriality of the soul. Most Muslim theologians believe in the materiality of the soul though they have different interpretations of it. It is quoted that most of the theologians have interpreted the soul as a major part of the body that remains the same from the beginning of life to its end and does not change.

Among the theologians who believe in the materiality of the soul one can refer to Seyyed Murtada, Sheikh Tusi, Abu al-Hossein Basri, and Ibn Heytham Bahrani, the seventh-century Shiite theologian and commentator of the Nahjul Balaghah. According to Allamah Majlisi, there is no sound rational reason for the immateriality or materiality of the soul. The apparent aspect of Qur’anic verses and Prophetic traditions refers to the materiality of the soul. According to Majlisi, there is doubt about the immateriality, luminosity, and heavenliness of the soul in the body. He contends that it is wrong to excommunicate those who believe in the immateriality of the soul.

Some have denied the immateriality of the soul but considered it a luminous body. These scholars believe that none of the reasons for the immateriality of the soul is dependable; rather, Qur’anic verses and Prophetic traditions suggest

that the soul is not one of the elementary material bodies. Some Christian philosophers and theologians have also denied the immateriality of the soul and believe that Christian doctrines like resurrection are also compatible with this view.

### **Reasons for the denial of immateriality:**

The deniers of the thesis of the immateriality of the soul have offered different reasons for the substantiation of their view, some of which are as follows:

- One of the reasons offered by Muslim theologians in refuting the immateriality of the soul is that “there is nothing like Him”. That is, nothing has any similarity to the Lord.

- One of the most important and well-known reasons of those who deny the immateriality of the soul is the problem of the relationship between the immaterial soul and the material body. Some deniers have considered the problem of the soul-body relationship to be irresolvable, mysterious, and opaque.

- The other reason highlighted by those who deny the immateriality of the soul is that of the dependence of the soul on the brain and cerebral cells. They argue that upon the emergence of intelligence and thinking, the brain shows further reaction and activity. On the other hand, when any damage is incurred to the brain or part of it, a human being loses his hold on sound thinking or some affairs related to human perception or memory.

In response to this problem, it is said that if intelligence and perception depend on the brain and neurons or when any damage is incurred to the brain, parts of human Knowledge or perceptions disappear because the body, brain, and neurons are considered to be the tools through which the soul acts. Thus, if these tools suffer any damage, the activities of the soul will be affected.

Among the criticisms offered by the deniers of the immateriality of the soul is the problem of the simultaneous individuality and distinction of souls. Why are there one or two souls? If souls are embodied, bodies cause them to be individuated or distinct. Thus, we will have a soul for each body; but if there are independent souls separated from the bodies, then there will be no difference between one soul and some thoughts and two souls with half of the same thoughts. If there is no difference between one soul and two other souls, there will be nothing called an immaterial soul.

The most important reason of the materialists in refutation of the immateriality of the soul is the belief in sensationalism and the denial of

all immaterial entities. According to materialists, there is nothing beyond the material world.

### **Materiality and Immateriality of knowledge in Islamic theology**

In the Islamic tradition of philosophical theology, knowledge or Knowledge of the self and the outside world, or the perception, constitutes a set of different Knowledge including the sensational, imaginary, illusive, and intellectual. The philosophers of mind consider human Knowledge to be limited to physical and mental phenomena. These two parts with one unique structure constitute our consistent Knowledge (Brentano, 1995, p. 59). According to Muslim philosophers and theologians, different types of Knowledge or knowledge are contingent upon an agent who is material in the view of some of these scholars and immaterial in the view of most of them. Thus, Muslim physicalists see perception or knowledge and its formation in human beings as a material process while Muslim dualists regard it as immaterial even if some of the stages and tools of the formation of knowledge in human beings are material.

In this part, we seek to assay the materiality of knowledge and perception in the thought of some Muslim physicalist theologians. But since here we are discussing the issue of materiality among Muslim thinkers, we begin with a brief review of Avicenna's views concerning the materiality of some types of perception. Of course, though Avicenna is known to be a philosopher, in some respects he could be seen as a theologian.

Though Avicenna has a dualist view of the nature of the soul and its relation to the body, he regards some types of perception or knowledge as material. He believes that human particular perceptions consist of sensory, imaginary, and material perceptions. Sensory perception is the perception of one thing along with its sensory properties including time, place, quantity, quality, as well as other material features (Shirazi, 2004, p. 393). In imaginary perception, a thing is also perceived with the same material features but its difference from sensory perception is that in sensory perception, a thing is certainly present for the perceiver while in imaginary perception, there is no precondition of the presence or absence of a thing (Shirazi, 2004, p. 394). Avicenna believes that from the materiality of the properties of sensory and imaginary perceptions, it is logically deduced that these perceptions are imaginary. Therefore, part of the process of the formation of knowledge and perception in human beings is material.

The basic challenge of Avicenna's view of the materiality of particular perceptions (sensory and imaginary) is that of the relationship between these

perceptions and the human soul. In other words, on the one hand, all of these human perceptions are dependent upon the human soul, and on the other hand, the soul, according to Avicenna, is an immaterial substance that is itself the source of different perceptual experiences in a human being. Therefore, Avicenna is stuck here in an epistemological-ontological paradox regarding the materiality of part of human perceptions and the immateriality of the source of human perceptions.

However, among Muslim theologians, some have clearly argued in favor of the materiality of human knowledge based on the materiality of the human soul, and, accordingly, they have leveled a series of criticisms against the philosophical thesis of the immateriality of the human soul and knowledge. One of these Muslim theologians is Ibn al-Mulhami al-Kharazmi, who is known to be a physicalist figure in the history of Islamic theology, because like many renowned physicalists of contemporary philosophy of the mind, he believes that what gives life and causes motion in human beings is material. He contends that a human being does not have a dualist identity; rather, he has a material or physical identity. According to al-Kharazmi, none of the arguments offered for the immateriality of the soul as well as the immateriality of knowledge and Knowledge in human beings by Muslim philosophers can logically demonstrate that firstly, a human being has a dualist identity, and secondly, the nature of knowledge and the process of formation of Knowledge in a human being is completely immaterial. He believes that basically knowledge and Knowledge in a human being is a phenomenon that is completely innate and self-evident and does not need any philosophical or logical definition or explanation, because human beings, upon self-contemplation, find that they are conscious of some things and not conscious of some others. Ibn al-Mulhami does not see this perception as something beyond the material structure of human beings; rather, he believes that it is the result of human internal actions and reactions and mental intentions. In other words, the human Knowledge of everything, even his Knowledge of having the capability of Knowledge and becoming conscious, is something that does not require any immaterial process and one should not think of a source like an immaterial soul for it.

Therefore, according to theologians such as Ibn al-Mulhami and those theologians who believe that God is the only immaterial being ever, there is no other immaterial entity whatsoever in this world. A human being and his knowledge and Knowledge are creatures among other creatures that exist and one cannot consider him to be immaterial. The physicalist Muslim theologians

believe that if the philosophers' arguments for the immateriality of the human soul are not convincing and do not logically prove the immateriality of the soul, then we must believe in the materiality of the soul, and, as a result, in the materiality of human knowledge and Knowledge. For knowledge and Knowledge is one of the aspects of the human soul and cannot be something separated from the human soul. That is, if the human soul is the source of the formation of the process of knowledge and Knowledge in a human being and also the thing that controls the process of Knowledge in him and manages it and if this soul does not have any immaterial nature, then knowledge and Knowledge in human beings will have a material nature and all types of human knowledge including the presential and acquired knowledge, as well as human knowledge of his own essence and knowledge of the surrounding environment, will all be essentially and as a process, material.

### **Conclusion**

As mentioned above, in the Islamic tradition, the discussion of knowledge, its formation process, boundaries, and characteristics hold great importance. Muslim theologians initially focused on the issue of Divine knowledge but over time, they shifted their attention to the nature of human knowledge based on human identity or psychology. Just as the dual approaches of dualism and unity were raised regarding human identity, two approaches were also presented concerning human knowledge. Those who considered human identity as transcending the body or a combination of the body and soul viewed human knowledge as immaterial. However, those who did not believe in something beyond the body in the formation of human identity also perceived the nature of knowledge as material.

### **Conflict of Interests**

The author has no competing interests.

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