

Ibn Khaldūn's Theories of Perception, Logic and Knowledge: An Islamic Phenomenology

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Ibn Khaldūn's theories about perception, logic and knowledge are clearly influenced by Aristotelian thought; however being somewhat eclectic, he adds, synthesizes and arrives at his own perspective. In addition, however novel Ibn Khaldūn's conclusions may be, there is the underlying awareness of the Source of all knowledge: "Knowledge comes only from Allah, the Strong, the Wise."¹ His philosophy, guided by the Qur'an and the Sunnah and sparked by his own genius and capacity for speculative thought, sometimes has much in common with Scholastic Realism, and indeed might be classified as Islamic Phenomenology.

According to Ibn Khaldūn, man is set apart from the lower stages of Allah's creations by his ability to think. Through this ability and the existence of the soul, he is able to move towards the world of the angels, the essence of which is pure perception and absolute intellection. It is the world of the angels which gives the soul power of perception and motion. Just as the stages are connected upward, so they are connected downward. For example, the soul acquires sense perceptions from the body as preparation for actual intellection and acquires supernatural perceptions from the angel stage for knowledge of a timeless quality.² Some scholars have attributed Ibn Khaldūn's description of spheres of existence to *Rasa'il Ikhwan As-Safa'* as he was most probably exposed to them via the school of Abu Al-Qasim Maslamah Al-Majriti in Cordova.³ But, the seventh epistle of the *Rasa'il*, which deals in detail with the spheres of existence, does not contain Ibn Khaldūn's concept of upward and downward movement, rather it describes a Platonic view of the soul puri-

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¹*Muqaddimah*, III, 481,

²*Ibid.*, I, 194; 215.

³Sayed Hossein Nasr, p. 51.

ying itself to eventually merge with the Universal Soul and Intellect, through the guidance of the "legitimate Imam."⁴

Ibn Khaldūn describes perception as a consciousness of things outside the essence of the perceiver. This is accomplished in the most basic way, through the senses, but man may additionally perceive things outside his essence through his ability to think. Like Kant, Ibn Khaldūn limits man's rational knowledge to the realm of experienced phenomena. This is compensated for by mysticism and revelation, which open for man the door to the unknown. Man's ability to think involves visualization, analysis and synthesis. He divides it into three degrees: the discerning intellect, the experimental intellect and the speculative intellect. The discerning intellect is used for man's understanding of the world. In this, Ibn Khaldūn separates thinking and action, making use of an Aristotelian point that the beginning of action is the end of thinking, and vice versa. Thus, there is an orderly link in perceptions. Animals lack this capacity to coordinate as they do not have the ability to think, and therefore are subordinate to man. The experimental intellect helps man to deal with his fellow men and to lead them. It enables man to distinguish between good and evil, between truth and falsehood. Experience is helpful here as it serves to focus learned knowledge, but experience takes time and so tradition aids the acquisition of social knowledge: "He who is not educated by his parents will be educated by time."⁵ Ibn Khaldūn's theory of the speculative intellect is seemingly inconsistent with his previous statements, and with his statements on the limits to man's intellectual capacity. As an isolated idea, it seems Platonic, and even Rationalistic, more in line with Ibn Rushd than Scholastic Realism. He says that the ability to think leads to hypothetical knowledge of an object beyond sense perception, which when combined with other knowledge may lead to the perception of existence, its reasons and causes, and that by thinking about these things, man achieves perfection in his reality and becomes pure intellect and perceptive soul.⁶ It should be remembered, however, that Ibn Khaldūn provides man with possible intervention and assistance from the soul in order to achieve intellection in the supernatural sphere.

Looking at Ibn Khaldūn's theory on perception in another way and at the same time following through to all possible stages of man's attainment, he says that sense perception leads to inward perception which leads to rationality. Inward perception is "common" sense. This "common" sense plus imagination, which is the sifter of sense-data input for the soul, leads to estimative power, which is the power to perceive abstract ideas. Estimative power plus

⁴*Encyclo. of Islam*, v.3, p. 1073.

⁵*Muqaddima*, II, 419. This will be elaborated below in the discussion of the acquisition of knowledge.

⁶*Ibid.*, II, 413.

memory power leads to thinking power. The memory stores all concepts, whether imagined or not. Thus, if perceptions at this level are corrupt, everything beyond them is corrupt. Thought is the process which leads to reflection and contemplation, the ultimate end of which is intellection, i.e., the state which emulates that of superior spiritual beings.⁷

To further clarify the role the soul plays in perception, Ibn Khaldun says that the soul wants to be free of the lower powers and move toward intellection, and as Allah has willed, it is constantly trying to do this. In this connection, he describes three types of human souls. The first is too weak to arrive at spiritual perception. He (the human soul) is therefore limited to the primary stage, based on memory and estimative power, which leads to worldly knowledge. Scholars are an example of this type of soul, and this is the usual extent of human corporeal perception. The second type of human soul is able to arrive at spiritual perception due to his innate preparedness for it. This type of soul possesses inward observations that are intuitive and unlimited, e.g., saints or men of mystical learning. The third type of soul can exchange humanity for the angel stage, and translate angelic knowledge into a form which can be perceived by other human beings, e.g., Prophets.⁸

In man's attempt to acquire knowledge, he most frequently relies on his rational judgement. Ibn Khaldūn, like the phenomenologist, sees logic as an artificial tool which does not lead to the discovery of truth. Also, like the phenomenologist, Ibn Khaldūn sees the connections of arguments resulting from heated controversies as deceptive, thus diversions from the attainment of knowledge, and he prefers to let thought follow the path set before it by its own nature. Compare this to the statement of the phenomenologist: "On all levels the phenomenological approach is opposed to explanatory hypotheses; it confines itself to the direct evidence of intuitive seeing."⁹ This is definitely the case, Ibn Khaldūn further states that logic as a method of perception is useless as man can only perceive, i.e., build concepts, based on abstractions of his own experience, which is limited to corporeal reality. Thus, in understanding the spiritual world and its essences (intellects), the conditions of logic do not apply. In other words, that propositions must be primary and essential does not apply because spiritual essences are of unknown essentiality; therefore, Ibn Khaldūn concludes that man must rely on religious law, and like Kant, on faith. Logic, then, is best used as a tool to sharpen the mind.¹⁰

Ultimate Truth is beyond man's limited perceptions. He gives the example of a deaf or blind man. Although this individual's perceptions may be limited,

⁷Ibid., I, 198.

⁸Ibid., I, 195-199.

⁹Spiegelburg, v.2, p. 700.

¹⁰*Muqaddima*, III, 137; 249; II, 420. Also, see Issaei, pp. 14-15.

this does not negate the reality of the existence of the thing which he can not perceive. Ibn Khaldūn does not, however, describe man's intellectual capacity as valueless. It is extremely valuable and reliable if confined to the limits of its ability; in fact, he implies that the awareness of the limits of one's intellectual perception is perception: "The inability to perceive is perception."¹¹

Plato spoke of "innate ideas," while Ibn Khaldūn says that man is born ignorant with an innate ability to think, and that the human essence reaches perfection through knowledge.¹² Of the three possible levels of knowledge, the lowest level, that of worldly knowledge is the one most easily attained by man. Knowledge may be learned from those who already possess it, i.e., parents, teachers, etc., but for those who lack this opportunity or who of their own volition do not choose this way, they can learn from pure experience. This kind of learning, however, will take a long time and will be uneven. Ibn Khaldūn views instruction as a craft because the skills necessary for knowledge of the sciences are best acquired through habit. He devotes an extensive discussion to the tenets of pedagogical method, some of the most important of which are: 1. the awareness of the importance of *habit*, which involves direct practice and constant repetition. "A habit is a firmly rooted quality acquired by doing a certain action and repeating it time after time, until the form of (that action) is firmly fixed."¹⁴ This refers to the acquired habit of the instructor, as well as to the acquiring of the habit by the student; 2. *gradualness*, proceeding from the simple to the complex;¹⁵ 3. *quick survey*, a rapid review of the field before trying to master details thoroughly; and 4. *continuity*, rather than stopping at every obstacle, return to the problem area later on in light of wider knowledge; 5. *studying students' aptitudes*; 6. *giving students concrete examples*, if possible. Thus, traveling in quest of knowledge is advised; 7. *not using undue severity with students* as Ibn Khaldūn observes that severe punishment induces laziness, insincerity, deceit and trickery, all of which causes the student to fall short of his human potentialities with respect to the acquisition of knowledge.¹⁶ Ibn Khaldūn distinguishes between the different bases involved in the formation of habits. Although memorization is essential, for

¹¹*Muqaddima*, III, 37-39. Also, see Qur'an (17:85) and *Sahih Al-Bukhari* in *Fath Al-Bari*, Kitab Al-'Ilm, v. 1., pp. 217; 223; 225, and *Sahih Muslim*, Kitab Al-'Ilm, v. 16, p. 216 for the Islamic viewpoint on the limits to man's knowledge.

¹²*Muqaddima*, II, 425.

¹³*Ibid.*, II, 412, footnote 2.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, II, 346.

¹⁵This same concept is found in *Sahih Al-Bukhari*; See *Fath al-Bari*, Kitab Al-'Ilm, v. 1., p. 160. From a longer explicatory statement about the value of knowledge: "And it is said that a good instructor is the one who starts teaching people simple subjects of knowledge before the big (difficult) ones."

¹⁶*Muqaddima*, III, Chap. VI, Sect. 34-40.

example, in the learning of poetry, the scientific and juridical habits involve active participation.¹⁷ Thus, the easiest way to acquire the scientific habit is through discussing and disputing scientific problems. In this case, memorization is not a sufficient aid to the goal of complete mastery of the subject. Here, Ibn Khaldūn makes a very modern observation in his statement that a student who sits in class never saying a word may have memorized more than some scholars but will not be able to use such knowledge effectively in discussion or teaching. Consequently, Ibn Khaldūn emphasizes doing as the best means of acquiring the scientific method.¹⁸

A concluding look at Ibn Khaldūn's ideas on perception, logic and knowledge from the perspective of philosophy reveals basic similarities, with some differences, between his thinking and that of Scholastic Realism and also with Phenomenology. Scholastic Realism as defined by Brubacher¹⁹ is primarily a Catholic philosophy which evolved out of the Scholastic Humanism of St. Thomas Aquinas. Thus, it has in common with Ibn Khaldūn the acceptance of the existence of the supernatural and the natural with the Eternal Divine Being as the Causer of Causes. The educational precepts of Scholastic Realism afford further similarities to Ibn Khaldūn's thinking. The first one is that school is a place where the mind masters the essentials of culture—the universal truths. Although the universal truths may differ due to the difference between Islam and Catholicism, the underlying principle is the same. Second is the assertion that there are limits to man's grasp of religious truth, but through supernatural revelation, the human mind can penetrate some of the Divine mysteries. Third is that there is individual freedom of will; thus, the student can accept or reject the authority of the teacher. Also, the authoritarian structure of this view of education works well in autocratic states. At the same time, it opens the highest careers to talent, in whatever social strata it is born. A basic difference between Scholastic Realism and Ibn Khaldūn lies in the Catholic concept of original sin which they see as a reason for the inability of the human mind to distinguish good, i.e., the good that is truth. This concept does not exist in Islam, thus, Ibn Khaldūn describes man's experimental intellect as enabling him to distinguish between good and evil, truth and falsehood.

From another perspective, Ibn Khaldūn's ideas are much in line with today's Phenomenologists. This becomes apparent upon considering the first three steps of Spiegelburg's phenomenological method, while keeping in mind an overview of Ibn Khaldūn's ideas, a general expression of which is that proof is in observation, not in logical arguments.²⁰ The first step in Spiegelburg's

¹⁷Ibid., III, 394.

¹⁸Ibid., II, 426-430.

¹⁹Brubacher, pp. 353-357.

²⁰*Muqaddima*, III, 251.

method is investigating particular phenomena, which he divides into three phases. The first phase is phenomenological intuiting, which involves critical concentration on the object. The second phase, phenomenological analyzing, refers to tracing the elements and structure of the phenomena obtained by intuiting. The third phase is phenomenological describing, by negation or by metaphor and analogy. One should concentrate on the central or decisive characteristics of the phenomenon and abstract from its accidentals. This step is similar to Ibn Khaldūn's discerning intellect. The Gestaltists have also accepted this step; thus there is similarity between their practical application of it in behaviourism and Ibn Khaldūn's theory of habit formation as a means of acquiring knowledge.

Step two is investigating essences. Spiegelburg points out that one cannot intuit essences without intuiting exemplifying particulars, which may be given in perception or in imagination or both, and that the general essence can be understood by looking at the examples as instances which stand for the general essence. This is a Platonic concept which is quite compatible with Islam, and relates directly to Ibn Khaldūn's theory on perception. The third step is apprehending essential relationships and refers to phenomenological a priori insight, i.e., phenomena which are known to us only from experience, a type of experience which gives one structural understanding of the connections between the phenomena, such that one can distinguish what is not essential to the essence without waiting for an indefinite number of repetitions. In reference to this point, Ibn Khaldūn observes the value of learning from pure experience, and the ability of the human mind to make connections and to speculate based on the knowledge he has gained.²¹

In summary, Ibn Khaldūn presents man as the focal point of the Universe. But, man before he reaches the stage of discerning intellect, is simply matter in as much as he is ignorant of all knowledge. Through knowledge, however, he reaches the perfection of his form. It is the discerning intellect, the god-given ability to think which enables man to arrange actions in an orderly, logical manner. The experimental intellect represents man's ability to acquire useful knowledge from his fellow men. The speculative intellect is man's ability to perceive existent things, whether present or absent. Thus, with the help of the soul and by Allah's mercy, man may acquire knowledge of a spiritual nature.

²¹Spiegelburg, v. 2, pp. 659-683. *Muqadimma*, I, 195-199; II, 412; 419; III, 246-257.

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