

Understanding Islam in terms of its Relation to Philosophy and its Use of Philosophy

As a first point, it is to be noted that it is no easy thing to understand anything if the necessary object is an understanding of philosophical positions that have either been unconsciously supposed or, in some way, admitted and put into a terminology of words and speech. Islam exists as a faith and also as a religion (in a combination of beliefs, understanding, and practice). But, if we can move toward an understanding which knows about the mentality or the mindset of believers as believers (according to what could be typical of them or according to what is to be normally expected of them; something that they themselves would admit and know if they were truly to understand what they, in fact, believe and know), we might begin to understand how or why a given religious tradition has been received in a particular way and why it continues to be received in a given way. A cognitional principle avers that “what is received is received according to the manner of the receiver.” What is understood is understood according to the manner of the understander. How much is being understood and known about the existence of divine things depends on the kind of cognition or on the kind of believing that belongs to a given believer (how the cognition or the believing is being exercised and put into effect). Change the outlook, the mentality, or the manner of reception and we can change not only the allegiance which belongs to a particular religion but also the goods or the content of a particular religion. What doctrines stand out against others that have lessened in their importance? What is the order which exists among them? The beliefs can all remain (they can still be all espoused) but the resonance or the impact can be altered and changed in ways that, before, had not been imagined or conceived.

In order for us to move toward an understanding of Islam as it is connected to the use of philosophy, let us begin with a point that comes to us from a German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, who, in 1960, published a major text entitled, *Truth and Method*: a work which contained, within it, a theory or a philosophy of prejudice which gives to prejudice a favorable evaluation. The point made is that each of us has been raised in a particular, historically conditioned, human context. Certain beliefs have been passed on to us: certain views or interpretations about the being of the world and the meaning of our lives within it; customary ways of thinking and acting. And so, by these beliefs and the manner of their juxtaposition, we can relate to a human order of things and we can also possibly create a new human order of things if such a need should arise. What has been given to us in our upbringing allows us to find our place within the greater world of things and to connect with other human beings. Hence, despite the limitations or the narrow mindedness that can be found in what has been given to us in our early years of life, our inherited prejudices play an essentially positive, necessary role for us as human beings. We err if we should regard our prejudices in an entirely negative light. In other words, our historicity exists as a human good. In it, we have a point of departure for coming to understand things that we do not initially understand and know and, at the same time too, nothing prevents the possibility of our going back and effecting changes in what we have first understood and known in the context of our lives (or changes in what we have not initially understood and known in the earlier context of our lives). As Aristotle had observed in the context of his own day and time: in our learning, we always move from the known to the unknown. We move from what we initially understand and know to what we can begin now to understand and know. Our learning and knowing never begins from a condition of pure ignorance nor from a complete lack of understanding about anything.

For this reason thus, from a viewpoint that is conditioned by the heritage and the tradition of Greek philosophy (the Greek discovery of the human mind: its powers and limitations), we initiate a study of Islam by a focus that asks about the place or the role of the human mind within Islam as a religion or,

alternatively, Islam as a religious culture. What is the role of knowledge or the role of learning within the Islamic intellectual tradition? What kind of epistemology is needed or what kind of epistemology is given if we are to justify and to explain to ourselves (and others) why we can know certain things and why we cannot know other kinds of things? How does a certain type of cognition and epistemology condition the reception of a saving message that is said to come from other worldly, transcendental sources? How, in turn, does the reception of a set of truths about the being of a transcendent God condition or lead to the rise of a certain type of human culture? The culture that we each have is conditioned by the kind of philosophy that we have been using and which we favor and, at the same time too, the culture that we have can also effect changes in the kind of philosophy which we should choose to use in a given context.

Coming now to the crux of our difficulties and the nub of the challenges that confront us: in attending to the role of the mind or the place of human reason within the world of cultural and religious Islam, in any discoveries that we can make and in any conclusions that we can draw, any pursuit that seeks to move toward these goals and objectives is conditioned or we would have to say that it is determined by the conception and the understanding of the human mind that our inquiries are supposing as normative, true, and proper. Begin with an exaggerated understanding about the powers of the human mind and then, from this, a truncated notion about that which pertains to the nature of the human mind, and the result will tend toward a similar kind of understanding about the place of the human mind within Islamic intellectual life. Certain things will not be known. Certain distinctions will not be drawn. A biased understanding will arise in a way that will tend to encourage defective forms of human response if we should try to move from the order of our understanding and knowing into the order of our doing and execution which belongs to the being of our external human actions (as we relate to ourselves and to other human beings).

Hence, before moving toward a thoughtful understanding about the relation which exists between Islam and philosophy or in order to move toward this desired thoughtful understanding, some observations need to be made about the nature of our human cognition (observations which could possibly point to a misplaced understanding about the nature of our human cognition and how too, from a misplaced understanding about the nature of our human cognition, we can move toward a fuller understanding about the nature of our human cognition) where, ultimately, our ulterior objective is a more adequate understanding about the nature of Islam and about how it relates to the use of philosophy in its practice and belief of religion. The better our self-understanding; the more variables which we can distinguish and know, the more we will move toward a similar understanding of Islam. We will know a larger number of variables and how they are all linked together in various and sundry ways. It goes without saying that, from within our self-understanding, from apprehensions which know many variables, judgments will emerge which should reflect the extent of this diversity and variety. Our judgments will be differentiated into a number of limited sets. They will be multiple, rational, and circumspect; and through a kind of modesty which should exist in our judgments, conditions will be created which should work for evaluations which will acknowledge where difficulties exist and how, from unlikely materials, good has been achieved. Judgments about truth and falsity, in conjunction with judgments about the presence of good and evil, can never be avoided. Our understanding inevitably leads to judgment and the good which exists in judgment although, here, our primary emphasis will be less with judgment than with the good of understanding. We work toward a possible growth in the depths of our understanding. If we can recall and use an ancient metaphor: better the milk of understanding than the rocks of judgment (as this pertains to the hardness of evidence that is offered in proof of certainties which are posited in the kinds of affirmations which belong to the making our human judgments).

We begin then with an exaggerated conception about the nature of the human mind in order to understand why, later, we can speak about a truncated understanding about the nature of the human mind as this can be found within western philosophies of the mind. An initial point of departure presents itself to us thus if we should attend to an understanding of the human mind which assumes that our human understanding is something which effects or causes itself. Simply put, within this point of view, our human cognition is to be regarded as self-caused. It is self-willed. In terms of the spiritual ancestry of this point of view, in the context of his own day and time, Plato had spoken about the human soul as the source or as the cause of all subsequent movement (as in “the soul moves itself”). Then later, in his own day and time, St. Augustine had spoken at times about human knowledge as something which, in its own way, begets itself. “Our mind always remembers, understands, and wills itself.” Hence, from this, in our human knowledge and knowing, a form of self-movement is to be properly alluded to and, if we convert this self-movement into a first principle which we can use to construct a general theory of human cognition, we have an interpretation which points not only to the autonomy of our human cognition but also, more strongly, to the independence of our human cognition since, as an effect of this point of view or directly within the being of this point of view, our knowing exists essentially as a human project and as a human product. It is us who do all the understanding. In understanding, we do what we have to do in order to understand that which we would like to understand and know. Our understanding exists as a function of our willing and desiring. It is entirely subject to the kind of self-control which belongs to us: a form of self-control is entirely conscious and deliberate. Other factors have not to be considered. They are extraneous. A technical manner of speaking accordingly speaks about the existence of potencies and the self-realization of these potencies. Our cognitive potencies, by themselves, move themselves or they bring themselves into a condition of act and this type of self-realization applies to all of our cognitive acts: whether our acts of sensing, our acts of questioning, our acts of understanding, or our acts of judging.

In turning then to the kind of truncation which exists within this voluntarist understanding of human cognition, nothing is said about the fact that, within the kind of performance or the kind of experience which exists within us within our cognition, some acts exist as activities while others exist as passivities. Compare, for instance, acts of questioning with acts of understanding. In asking questions, there is nothing that we cannot question or ask about. If we were to try to claim that some kind of limit exists, nothing prevents anyone from posing questions that could question the validity of a proffered limit. But then, if we turn to our acts of understanding, try as we will, we notice that we cannot force ourselves to have an act of understanding that we might desire. We can try to find a solution by working from different angles, trying this approach and then another approach. But, if we should reflect upon ourselves in the experience that is given to us within the actuation of our cognition, we should discover that insights or acts of understanding are given to us as gifts (as receptions). They often come to us when we least expect them. In fatigue or frustration, we can break off from attempting to solve a difficult problem. We do something else. We try and not think about it. And then, in an unguarded moment, when not expecting it, an answer or a solution is suddenly given to us. We understand that “x” must equal “y” or why this must be related to that (according to this way and not according to some other way). An analysis of our understanding and cognition should find evidence to the effect that our human cognition exists as a combination of different kinds of acts: active and passive acts which intertwine and interrelate with each other, each in their own way effecting or causing the other in a manner which does not resemble the material or the physical operations of a mechanical device but, instead, immaterial or spiritual operations which tend to be subtle, suggestive, thoughtful, reasonable, and rational.

To some extent admittedly, as human beings, we always exist as cognitive agents but, at other times or at the same time, in other ways, we always exist as passive agents. If we are to hear the sounding or the ringing of a bell, the pealing of a bell must first occur and exist. The ringing or the pealing intrudes into the kind of consciousness which exists in our sensitive consciousness and, without our willing it or without our preventing it, we necessarily hear. Similarly too, no seeing exists apart from the experience of light. The light must be first given to us. Minus the light; minus the seeing. Our acts of sensing and our acts of understanding both exist essentially as passive or as receptive acts. They are caused by external conditions that act upon us from without. Our acts of seeing and our acts of understanding are brought into being through causalities that are joined in some way to the kind of individual causality or to the kind of openness which belongs to each of us as human beings. The kind of complexity which exists within the order of our human cognition belies the value or the truth of an approach which would prefer to have an understanding of things that is a bit more simple. The kind of cognition which belongs to animals differs from the kind which belongs to us as human beings. Our cognition exists as a larger kind of thing: as, in general, an interaction between active and passive acts where, within the sway or the ambit of this context, a form of mutual causality is to be alluded to; a form of mutual causality which exists through the order of interactions which exist between, on the one hand, our acts of sensing and our acts of questioning and understanding and, on the other hand, in addition, a second order of interactions which exist between the kind of knowing which belongs to us as human beings and the kind of willing which also belongs to us as human beings. Causations exist (from within the context of a relative viewpoint) but apart from unilinear kinds of relations as one kind of act serves to influence or to act upon the being of another kind of act.

By way of a kind of conclusion about what can be said about the being and the nature of the human mind (as a heuristic point of departure): the passivity which exists within our human cognition in conjunction with the activity which also exists within the fabric of our human cognition accordingly points to a larger conception of human reason which is only grasped if we should refer not only to *a posteriori* apprehensions of being which accompany an understanding of human cognition which thinks in terms of activity but also to *a priori* apprehensions of being which accompany an understanding of human cognition which also thinks in terms of passivity and reception. To understand the significance of this difference, we think about the kind of cognition which seems to occur most predominately within the practice of philosophy and science. For reasons of precision, to work with a technical manner of speaking: *a posteriori* apprehensions of being tend to be associated with the kind of knowing and cognition which exists within philosophy and science as, here, we move from absences of understanding and knowledge toward new experiences of understanding and knowledge. Questions arise because something is not known or understood and so we want to move toward an understanding and knowledge that we would now like to have. However, before we can engage in this type of human knowing, the larger context of this knowing exists as a kind of *a priori*, through *a priori* apprehensions of being that are already given to us because, as noted, our knowing and learning never moves from a condition of pure ignorance toward a condition of knowledge (from a context that is devoid of any kind of understanding and knowledge). All of our acts of human inquiry presuppose a context or an order of being that, in some way, is already known and which is given to us as living human beings.

Certain things exist that, in some way (or tacitly), we understand and know even if it should be the case that our understanding is limited, in some ways obscure, and so not lacking in inchoate qualities of one kind or another. Within, for instance, symbolic apprehensions of meaning, cognitive aspects point to the being of realities that, in some way, we acknowledge and already know. We live within a kind of

light or a shadow that is cast by the experience which we have of them, despite the lack of understanding which we can have until, perhaps later, we can move into the kind of penetration and understanding which belongs to the practice of philosophy and science. Aesthetic configurations within the sensible order of things, as these are constructed and formed by us in the practice of the arts, add punch and weight to the kind of signification that is given to us through symbolic apprehensions of meaning. About the being of many things (about the being of this reality or that reality), some questions have not to be asked: we have not to wonder if, in fact, something exists; if, indeed, we should believe in the being of certain things. Hence, within the order of our human cognition, prior to the rise of reason as a cognitive dimension within the experience that we should have of ourselves in our consciousness of self, initial inchoate apprehensions of being and reality function (for us) in a necessary way (as our point of departure for our subsequent acts of cognition), and this prior context exists as a conditioning variable or, more pointedly, it exists as a species of cause: for (1) the deliberate, deliberative kind of knowing that emerges in the kind of cognition which belongs to the asking of philosophical and scientific questions and (2) the direction or the line that we should take within the kind of cognition which belongs to us in how we engage in the praxis of philosophy and science.

As a consequence thus, if we are to have a complete view about the nature of our world and the nature of our human understanding (how our cognition exists and operates; how, in fact, we exist as potential knowers and as actual knowers within the context of our world), an apprehension is needed within the order of our philosophic reasoning and conception which realizes and admits that *a priori* apprehensions of being and *a posteriori* apprehensions of being exist together in a manner which points to a form of mutual conditioning which must exist between the two (in a form of mutual causality). If, in our cognition, *a posteriori* apprehensions of being move from acts of sense through toward acts of understanding and judgment through the instrumentality of questions that we can ask and pose, *a priori* apprehensions of being are given to us in a way which differs from this mode of inquiry. Their initial givenness points to sources and causes which are quite other than ourselves; sources and causes that we do not consciously control; sources and causes that exist in an external and transcendental kind of way, relative to the kind of being which we happen to have and to enjoy as human beings; sources and causes that can be grouped in terms which can speak about a kind of knowing or a kind of manifestation which would have to exist for us as a species of givenness which exists as revelation.

In some way, mysteriously and, in its own way, providentially, a higher order of things conditions or it makes for (1) the possibility of a later kind of knowing that we can initiate through our inquiry and the different kinds of questions that we can ask and, at the same time too, as noted, it indicates a particular direction for (2) the questions which we would want to ask (facilitating the form, the shape, or the content of our individual questions). To some extent, with a degree of remoteness, *a priori* apprehensions of being always point us toward an order of objects that, possibly, we can reach more fully if, in some way, *a posteriori* apprehensions of being can be given to us through the acts of understanding that, possibly, we can have and enjoy. Everything begins with *a priori* apprehensions of being and, if this is our starting point, the better our understanding of these conditions as these exist for ourselves and others, then the better the kind of understanding which could possibly come to us through subsequent *a posteriori* apprehensions of being.

To this end then, after we have attended to an understanding of human cognition which hopefully transcends more limited understandings and conceptions of it, we can now begin to forage toward a study that can take us into the world of Islam and how, amongst Muslims, there exists an understanding

of the human mind which perhaps has been conceptualized or which perhaps, in other ways, has not yet been put into any kind of terminology that consists of word and phrases. We begin, in a way, as novices but, in another way or in addition, we begin in hope. We want to understand something that exists universally among all of us as human beings although it is a universal that has been grasped in different ways and which is understood in different ways, sometimes poorly and sometimes richly. The object is an understanding that is not lacking in penetration and, at the same time, an understanding that is not lacking in the care and sympathy that should be shown to the precariousness and the mysteriousness of our individual human existence.

To this end, please find below an appended, copied, and pasted list of readings that has been drawn up by Michael Lessman as an initial guide for reading and study. An annotated bibliography is being prepared. As Michael notes below in two paragraphs:

While the primary sources listed below reflect the creativity and multivalence of Kalam, Sufism, and Philosophy, the secondary readings aim is to contextualize these readings in the close dialogue between Kalam and Philosophy that began in the 9th century in Baghdad with the Mutazilites and the Illuminationist philosophy of al-Suhrawardi, and continued through the 16th century in Isfahan in the transcendentalist school of Mulla Sadra.

NOTE: I would suggest for the fall to stick to one primary text. My own leaning is towards al-Suhrawardi, since he is, I think, rather emblematic of Sufism both in his approach to understanding God and his persecution (martyrdom) at the hands of the state.

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