



Research Article

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Exceeding Self-Awareness and Being Aware of the External World

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the approaches of two rationalist philosophers, namely Avicenna from the East, and Descartes from the West, on the epistemic relationship between the human mind and the external world. The introspective reflection of both philosophers is the starting point on which they establish their epistemic structure spanning a passage over this gap. Their engagement in this introspection bears some considerable similarities and distinctions which allow me to do a comparison between some of their epistemic theories which are based on their rationalism and explain how a person exceeds self-awareness to be aware of the external world. Taking a detailed look at the two thinkers' methodologies and their approaches to self-awareness, the effort tries to analyze systematically their epistemological theories explicating the cognitive relationship between the mind and the external world. In the course of the discussion, Avicenna's theory concerning the actualization of quiddity either with the mental or with the objective existence is compared with Descartes' meditations according to which through a dynamic series of mental exercises the mind follows in its journey from an absolute doubt to an absolute certainty. The discussion leads to raise some fundamental questions of their expositions proceeding from self-reflection to the awareness of the outer world. Although the critical discourses in the history of philosophy on the ideas of the two philosophers assist me in this research, the methodology of this research is concerned with the conceptual analysis rather than historical influences.

Keywords: Avicenna, Descartes, certainty, inner world, external world

1. Introduction

The explanation of relationship between self-awareness and being aware of the external world is one of the engagements of some realist philosophers such as Avicenna and Descartes who deemed that the objective world is independent of human mind. As to the very issue, Avicenna's scenario of

floating man (Ibn Sīnā, *Shifā* 1975; Ibn Sīnā, *Ishārāt*, 1892; Marmura, 2005)¹ and Descartes' cogito (Cottingham et al., 1985) were widely discussed and compared by modern commentators through different aspects (Butterworth, 1988). However, the problematic process they apply to explain how one proceeds from self-awareness to know the external world evokes still more questions that require some broader systematic analysis in the foundations of their rationalism.

As far as the history of anthropology is concerned,, the issue of self-awareness has been viewed through various perspectives by philosophers and psychologists. Self-awareness which engages in introspective reflection is an ability to recognize oneself as a certain reality possessing consciousness and separating from everything in its environment. In the history of philosophy, particularly that of Aristotelian tradition, we see a tendency according to which issues surrounding the self-knowledge and consciousness have been considered as to focus on their epistemic and psychological aspects. The general tendency to the role of self and self-knowledge continued until Modern Age and went as far as David Hume (1711-1776) who denied self as a real fact and defined it as just a bunch of sense perceptions (Hume, 1896). Based on this general trend, Kant (1724-1804) believed that since the consciousness of self is an empirical and continually changing experience, a substantial and sustained fact as self could not present itself in this continually changing inner experience (Kant, 1981). We could trace the origin of this importance of self-knowledgement in Aristotelian thought which characterized human intellect as an absolute capacity which is not actually anything before it starts knowing other things (Black, 2008). The present paper is particularly to shed light on two exceptional inclinations, namely, Avicenna (980-1037), as a peripatetic philosopher of the Islamic world, and Descartes (1596-1650), as one of the pioneers of modernism, who both centred the foundation of their philosophy on introspection and explained the possibility of proceeding from self-awareness to know the external world.

The problem statement is explicitly specified to make an inquiry whether the two rationalist philosophers could proceed from self-reflection to know the external world or remain in their epistemic introspection, a conclusion which in effect contradicts the realist foundation of their epistemic theories. Descartes' argumentative strategy, in proceedings from self-awareness, is based on a kind of logical deductive inference that verifies the hypothesis that there must be a supreme Being which is not capable of deceiving human beings in their understanding of the external world (Descartes, 1964-76). Hence, Descartes relying on the denial of any systematic impediment of knowing the outside world settles his epistemology on a realist ground. Based on a logical systematic analysis, it is analyzed in this research whether there is a contradiction between deception and perfection that Descartes assumes they cannot be both logically true in a supreme Being. Instead, since Avicenna's metaphysical starting point is not based on doubt (Marmura, 2005), his epistemic optimism is established on the sameness of quiddity (= essence) which is either actualized by the external or by the mental existence, the theory originates from his special ontology. In fact, the nature of correspondence theory is changed into the identity theory in Avicenna's scholarship to explain the sameness of essence of the known object in the mind and in the external world. In spite of this optimistic explanation, the effort is to give a highlight to a question which still nags how we can verify that the quiddity of a known object in our mind is identical with what is in the external world? Of course, this is not an epistemological predicament in Avicenna's doctrine because the issue stems in fact from his ontological explication underlying the sameness between the essence of objects with mental and the external existence. But, as there is not any fundamental skeptical theory in Avicenna's ontology, (Ibn Sīnā, *Najāt*, 1938; Ibn Sīnā, *Ishārāt*, 1971; Gutas, 2013) this problem still remains out of question in his epistemology.

2. Discussion

Among the inner realities such as pain or happiness, the state of awareness plays a fundamental role in Avicenna's epistemic and psychological approach. To explain this special awareness,

¹ These works hereafter cited as *Psychology*, *Ishārāt*, *Shifā*.

Avicenna proposes an introspective reflection propounded in his specific hypothesis known as floating (flying) man (Ibn Sīnā, Ishārāt, 1971; Inati, 2014). In this thought experience, on one hand, self-awareness is an initial point indicating how Avicenna's epistemology is established on an inner indubitable reality independent of body and continually aware of its existence. On the other hand, it involves the independence of human soul as an immaterial reality separate from body and its physical properties. Hence, Avicenna's thought experience which then became controversial among Latin Scholars and influential on the modern tenets such as Cartesian Cogito can be concerned with two perspectives: epistemology and psychology.

The psychological aspect of this experience which serves as the primary purpose is concerned with Avicenna's disagreement with Ash'arites, Muslim speculative theologians (*Mutakallimūn*), on the question of the nature of what every person refers to by expressing personal pronoun "I". The Arabic word *Nafs* (soul, self) is commonly used by Muslim scholars in their works to refer to the referent of the pronoun "I". Their problematic question was whether the essence of this referent, as a reality, is an immaterial rational soul as Avicenna maintained or as a material entity as the theologians held (Marmura, 2005). To prove his idea about the reality of human soul, Avicenna appeals to a hypothesis in which the person has to imagine himself at the beginning of his creation with healthy intellect and disposition, supposedly the person is in a suspended space and all his sensory organs are totally deprived and different parts of his body do not perceive each other nor has the person his members (Ibn Sīnā, Ishārāt, 1971; Inati, 2014; Ibn Sīnā, Shifā, 1975; Ibn Sīnā, Ishārāt, 1892). In such a suspended position, the person finds that he ignores everything except an independent substance conscious of itself and independent of his body. In this circumstance, by referring to the soul as the conscious reality and body as the unconscious thing, Avicenna determines the distinction between soul and body, and assigns all material aspects of human being like hands, feet and other physical organs as external objects. Therefore, Avicenna's emphasis in this thought experience is on settling his psychological attitude based on the dichotomy of human soul as an immaterial reality and body as a matter against the Muslim theologians who denied the quality of being immaterial in human soul.

The epistemic aspect of this experience deals with a kind of self-awareness in which Avicenna endeavors to find an indispensable starting point of human knowledge. The concept of self-awareness is the same starting point of human knowledge that plays a primordial role in Avicenna's epistemology (Black, 2008). This experience clearly illustrates how the foundations of his epistemology are settled on a kind of primitive self-awareness in which the real entity of human being, and soul, could perceive itself directly independent of its physical organs. As for the terminology of soul which is the translation from the Arabic word "*Nafs*", it simply refers to the very reality that one means by saying "I" and in some works of Michael Marmura it is translated as self (2005). Avicenna's experience is that if one imagines himself to be in his first creation, matured and whole in mind and body, while it is supposed that he is in a generality of physical circumstance in which his limbs do not touch each other but are rather spread apart so that he does not perceive the parts of his body, and that he is momentarily suspended in temperate air, he will find that he is unaware of everything except the fixedness of his individual existence (Ibn Sīnā, Ishārāt, 1971; Ibn Sīnā, Ishārāt, 1958). In such an experience, the conscious reality of human being, the soul, is apprehended directly by itself abandoning any effect of external objects, even its body, limbs or internal organs.

Avicenna is of the view that human being at the very outset involves self-awareness which is prior to other knowledge, and essentially is concomitant with human being. That is, if the human soul comes to be, self-awareness simultaneously comes to be along with it too. Such an awareness is a direct one (Alwishah, 2006) as there is no condition, except for the existence of human soul, for it in any way. Nor is human soul aware of itself through anything, but rather it is aware of and through itself. The concomitance between human soul and self-awareness is so strong that Avicenna identifies self-awareness with the soul's mere existence (Ibn Sīnā, al-Ta'liqāt, 1973). These concomitance originates from the fact that the act of introspection is caused by the object introspected (Ibn Sīnā, al-Mubāḥḥāṭ, 1992), and this is the only case in which Avicenna accepts the unity between the known object and the knower subject.

Since Avicenna is a realist philosopher who believes in a real, independent world outside

human soul, he explains the process of proceeding from self-awareness to be aware of the external world (Inati, 2014). Sense perception is the initial step Avicenna takes toward the external world. For Avicenna, the external world which is the source of knowledge for man is divided into two levels: material world including all corporeal objectives such as inanimate objects, plants, animals, and their material properties like color, shape, space or time, and intelligible world containing incorporeal realities such as intellects, angels and intelligible forms. Human's direct contact with the material world is established by what Avicenna calls external senses, namely sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. Each of the sense organs is influenced by a specific sensible material object, and perceives its form by depending on its special capacity. From the standpoint of Avicenna's view, the human mind at the beginning of life is in the stage of potentiality empty of any kind of thought, and gradually sensory organs receive some impressions by establishing a direct contact with the material world. Here, he puts forward Aristotelian theory of potency to prove that there is a kind of passive and active relationship between human intellect empty at birth and the external objects (Knuuttila, 2008). In fact, sense perception plays a primitive role in knowing the external world and within a cognitive process provides the opportunity of apprehending intelligible forms. Hence, for Avicenna, the knowledge of the external world is of different levels that initiates from sensation and proceeds to apprehension of intelligible forms.

However, considering Avicenna's view about the degrees of abstraction which explains the progress from particular sensible forms to universal intelligible forms shows that we could not simply know Avicenna as an absolute empiricist philosopher. Specially, in spite of initial role of sensation, Avicenna downplays the authenticity of sense experience in representing the essence of an object, and considers its function as the preliminary operation which serves to make human soul ready for apprehending the intelligible forms from an incorporeal level of the world (Inati, 2014; Hasse, 2013; Yaldir, 2009). This explanation in Avicenna's epistemic exposition tends to be towards the Neoplatonic approach to the realities at a higher level of existence and the notion of real knowledge. This is the very point based on which Avicenna's interpreters mainly elicited two empirical and rational explanations from his philosophy (Hasse, 2013). So, Avicenna's epistemic exposition in knowing the external world is neither absolutely empirical nor a rational approach but rather a kind of empirical-rational interpretation.

Around six centuries after Avicenna, in the Western world at the beginning of the modern period, self-awareness in a similar manner was viewed by French philosopher Rene Descartes to establish his epistemology on an absolute certainty. The awesome similarity between the two philosophers is that this philosopher, too, leaves the person in a suspended state, and absolute doubtfulness, to maintain an initiating foundation to establish the whole certain knowledge on it (Descartes, 1964-76; Cottingham and Stoothoff, 1985). The suspended state is the common approach both the philosophers appeal to, but Avicenna performs it in imagining a physical hanging position of the body while Descartes' entirely absolute doubtfulness leaves the person in a mentally suspended position. In such a suspended state, Descartes seeks an initiating certainty to establish the whole knowledge on it and to argue how a person starts proceeding from self-awareness to know the external reality. Unlike Avicenna, Descartes in his doubtfulness appeals to the idea of a most perfect Being as the departure from the inner to the external world (Cottingham and Stoothoff, 1985; Descartes, 1964-76). However, as Avicenna's metaphysical starting point is not in doubt, in his thought experience he does not prove his existence or seek a certainty to establish his philosophical system on it. For Avicenna and other Muslim scholars, it is certain that there is existence here and the knowledge of soul is included among those cognitions that are necessary.

Before carrying out a comparative study between their epistemic expositions, it seems necessary to make a short synopsis of Descartes' epistemic method. As Avicenna's scenario, floating man, leaves the person pendent in a physically suspending situation to find a stable cornerstone, Descartes' epistemic methodology, too, drowns the person thoroughly in a kind of mental suspended circumstance to seek a stable point secured to establish his knowledge on it. The circumstance in which Descartes attempts to discover a trustful object is doubtful which questions the principles in which the knowledge of his time was based. So, the theory of doubt as a touchstone has an effective role in this philosopher's methodology, and he just admits the propositions which could survive in the flood of doubts. In his meditation, Descartes discovers an

undeniable reality, thinking thing, and asserts that he is something which thinks and that he could not deny or even doubt this reality (Cottingham and Stoothoff, 1985; Descartes, 1964-76). Therefore, the thinking thing, or self, is the first undeniable object that he finds and self-awareness is the first knowledge he admits as a secured point to establish all his knowledge on it.

After proving the existence of self and what belongs to it like thinking as the inner world, Descartes is ready to deal with the outer world and starts seeking whether we could affirm anything outside the self. Descartes draws an obscure line between the inner and external world. My mind and whatever belongs to it, such as thinking and its different forms like desiring, imagining ideas or doubting constitute my inner world, and the external world consists of my body, God if exists, other minds and all material objects. The crucial point here is that how Descartes bridges the gap between these two worlds in a manner that he could certainly acknowledge the existence of what appears to exist. The fact that we experience perceptions from the external world such as different sounds, shapes, colors, smells, tastes and so many others could not be doubted, but we may fall to error just when we attempt to go beyond our ideas and perceptions to seek what are represented by them (Cottingham and Stoothoff, 1985; Descartes, 1964-76).

We know that to bridge this epistemic gap, Descartes appeals to the concept of a supremely perfect Being, God. Relying on the rule of clarity and distinctness, Descartes presented his cosmological argument for the existence of God to prove with certainty that God exists (Ibid). After having proved the existence of God, Descartes' problem is how we could be sure that such a dominantly omnipotent being is not so evil a God that constantly is ingeniously deceiving us in what our perceptions and ideas represent. As the origin of will to do deceit is because of defect, Descartes in his third and fourth meditations denies the possibility of God's deception (Ibid). This argument leads us to conclude that as God exists and is not a deceiver, He may not mislead us in understanding what is real. That is, we could not be created essentially in a systematic error inescapable. In short, according to Descartes, by proving the fact that my self as a thinking thing must exist, that the idea of an absolutely infinite being, God, necessarily has a corresponding objective in the real world, and that such a supreme reality could not be a deceiver, the door would be open for me to exit from self-awareness to be aware of the outer world.

3. Comparing Avicenna's And Descartes' Epistemic Perspectives

The crucial point here is that in the two philosophers' systems, introspective reflection plays a key position in their methodologies. They, however, appeal to this basic point with different purposes. According to Descartes, introspective reflection is the initial point of awareness to establish his rationalist epistemology on it, but Avicenna has more a psychological approach to it to determine the reality and domain of what each person refers to as "I", soul "Nafs", an immaterial conscious fact independent of the body and other physical aspects. This difference originates from the fact that, unlike Descartes, Avicenna did not have essentially any skeptical theory in his epistemology to challenge him to reply his doubtness. Yet since introspection is an acceptable initial principle in the two philosophers' doctrines, it could be a comparable point in their philosophies. They used two different methods to approach this beginning point. Through the scenario of floating man, Avicenna proposed a physically suspended position to discover the self which is immediately aware of its own existence, and is also independent of and separate from the body and material aspects. Descartes' methodology, however, is a kind of mental pending which enables him to recognize himself as a thinking thing whose reality is undeniable. Both the philosophers appeal to two suspended states to seek an indubitable starting point which appears different to them. The indubitable point which Descartes reaches is the state of doubtness itself, but the soul "Nafs" as the substance supporting this state is Avicenna's certain base. In both the scenarios the soul, as an indubitable reality, plays the main role, and self-awareness is the foundation of knowledge. According to Avicenna, the criterion of certainty in self-awareness is its directness and unconditionedness and that is the reason why we could be certain of its truth while the truth of our awareness of the objects in the external world is conditioned, that is, it depends on conformity between the ideas and the objects represented by them. But in Descartes' epistemology, the theory of clarity and distinctness as a touchstone determines the certainty or doubtless.

After proving the inner world as the first principle, the main epistemic problem in the two philosophers' epistemologies is the proceeding from the self to the external world. Descartes wondered whether he could be sure that he is sitting in a particular place, feeling the heat of the fire in front of him, clothed in his winter gown, touching the piece of wax in his hands and other intimations. To proceed further, he appeals to the idea of an existent substance possessing positive attributes in an unlimited degree. He assumes a Supreme Being which, as the most perfect fact, may not be an evil deceiver to mislead us into understanding the real objects in our physical environment. Of course, as it was already mentioned, since there is not any skeptical theory in Avicenna's scholarship, he did not need to appeal to a Supreme Being to open the door to the external world. If Avicenna endeavors to prove the existence of God, instead of finding an epistemologically certain foundation, his main goal is to interpret his religious theism from a rational standpoint.

The two philosophers' approaches to the validity of sense perceptions are also different. Sense perception is the initial step Avicenna takes towards the external world. In comparison with Descartes, we cannot consider Avicenna as an absolute rationalist philosopher. In Avicenna's epistemology, sense perceptions play the fundamental and beginning role. Relying on the validity of sense perceptions, he settles for the abstraction theory on perceiving the particular sensible forms, and thereby he rationalized the process of abstracting intelligible universals and preparation of the human intellect to receive the intelligible concepts through emanation from the Active Intellect. Descartes' skepticism, however, rejects the validity of sense perceptions. He asserts that sensation could be perceived clearly and distinctly if it is considered merely as a sensation or idea, but when it is judged whether it exists outside the mind or how it is, there is no way to prove that our sense impressions are representing the real objects in the external world.

The two philosophers' different approaches to the function of rationalism in knowing the external world is considerable. According to Descartes, just intellectual ideas which are perceived clearly and distinctly are innate and reliable. Descartes' rationalism is based on pure reason providing the primary basis for human knowledge. Geometric definitions, axioms of mathematics and the extent of matter are some of the cases of conceiving something intellectually. For instance, without seeing or touching a spherical object we could understand easily the concept of sphere by its mathematical definition, a three-dimensional surface, all points of which are equidistant from a fixed point. Such an understanding is absolutely a rational perception which is a function of the mind without any relationship with the sense perception and external world, and the idea of the sphere is general and does not have any particular properties of such specific size, color, location or motion (Ibid). In fact, intellectual ideas tell us the eternal truths which are general and not dependent on a corresponding present object. Although, amongst Muslim scholars, Avicenna is known as a rationalist philosopher, the meaning of rationalism in his doctrine is essentially different from what we see in Descartes' scholarship. Abstracting the universal intelligible concepts from particular sensible forms is the basis of Avicenna's rationalism (D'Ancona, 2008). According to Avicenna, the function of rationality is identified in the process of abstraction. That is, the particular sensible forms provided by sensory organs to the extent that are detached by human intellect from material properties such as time, space, shape and others, their relationship to the material world decreases, and after images (*Takhayyulāt*) they are raised to a higher rank of existence, incorporeal realities known as intelligible forms (*Ma'qūlāt*), and are apprehended just by human intellect. In this rank of abstraction, sense perception as a material factor in the process of cognition absolutely loses its function because rational soul or human intellect, which itself is an incorporeal substance, is the substratum of incorporeal intelligibles which emanate from Active Intellect.

Avicenna's theory of abstraction explains how through a process of abstraction human intellect proceeds from a particular sensible form of something to its universal intelligible concept possessing a deeper level of the reality. Based on Neo-platonic interpretation, it explicates how perception of sensible forms enables human soul to be connected to Active Intellect which is the source of intelligible concepts in a higher order of existence (Ibn Sīnā, Najāt, 1938). In this sense, sense perception is concerned with comprehending a superficial level of a reality, and is a precondition to know an intelligible concept which is a profounder level of the reality. Therefore, according to the abstraction theory, we see a hierarchical order in the reality of which apparent

sensible level is perceived through sensory organs, and its universal intelligible essence coming from a great depth is comprehended by human intellect. That is, in accordance with Avicenna's abstraction theory, in each degree of abstraction, we know some level of reality whilst in Descartes' methodology there is not such a hierarchical order in reality, but our understanding of the reality bears a range from ambiguity to clarity and distinctness, and to know the essence of something, we have to demolish its idea completely to recognize its essential properties which is clear to us and distinct from others. In other words, according to Descartes, to know the essence of everything, we must have a clear and distinct idea of it in our mind, but as determined by Avicenna, in the process of proceeding from particular sensible forms to intelligible universal concepts, different levels of reality are known by the human intellect.

As it was mentioned earlier, to open the door into the external world, Descartes' appeals to prove the existence of an absolutely supreme being whose deception is necessarily impossible. For the purpose, he relies on the method similar to Anselm's argumentation, namely, the idea of the most perfect existent. The first problem of this argumentation is that Descartes by relying on a merely mental idea of a Supreme Being attempts to prove God's existence in the external world. This is the very problem faced by typical rationalist who privileges the mind and ends up being an idealist, if not solipsist, who could not establish the reality of the external world. Plato was well aware of this, but he regarded the external world as being an imperfect copy of the world of forms which is only accessible through the mind. Hence his ontology is slightly different in that he actually believed in the separate existence of a world of forms, which contemporary rationalists do not subscribe to. The second one is related to God's deception which after proving the God's existence has a fundamental role in Descartes' argument. Since the theory claiming that the source of deception is an imperfection is an ethical assumption, the question arises how we can rely on an ethical principle in our philosophical theories which must be based on bare reason.

4. Conclusion

If we analyze Descartes' argumentative strategy, we could explicate that Descartes through a kind of deductive inference, namely reasoning from general to specific, reaches a conclusion that God is not capable of deceiving.

- A. The major premise: The most perfect being cannot be deceiver.
- B. The minor premise: God is the most perfect being.
- C. Conclusion: God cannot be a deceiver being.

There is not any problem in the form of this argumentation, but the main question is about the matter of this deduction i.e. the major premise: The most perfect being cannot be deceiver. If I asked Descartes how he claimed that the most perfect being cannot be deceiver, he would probably reply that deception originates from imperfection, and as imperfection and perfection are contradictories, they cannot be both true in a fact and since God is perfect He cannot be imperfect, and ultimately since He is perfect, He cannot be deceiver. But it is not justified how Descartes reached the conclusion that since God is perfect, He cannot be a deceiver. Explicitly, what is the contradiction between deception and perfection that Descartes assumed that they cannot be both true in a perfect Being? Can we prove logically a concomitance like causal relationship between deception and imperfection to argue that since there is not the cause of deception in God, there is no deception in God? It seems there is no logical contradiction between the deception and the perfection unless relying on an ethical principle we claim that they are two contradictory attributes which both could not be true in a fact.

While on the contrary, due to Avicenna's ontology, no epistemological skepticism originates from his doctrine. He proposes his epistemic optimism relying on the identical quiddity which either is actualized by the external or by the mental existence; the theory originates from his special ontology. Whenever the quiddity is actualized in the external world, it bears its special properties such as extent, place and others, and when the same quiddity appears with mental existence, being representative is its most important effect. First, this explanation accentuates that not only Avicenna denies that the external world is a projection of our mental states, but also he holds it is a mind-independent fact outside the knower and marks its impression on the human mind. Second, it

indicates that Avicenna relying on the correspondence theory explains the relationship between the known object and the knower.

To examine the weak and strong points of this theory, we have to prove that the forms present to mind accurately represent their objects, and really correspond to them. For the purpose, Avicenna suggests the theory of identical quiddity which is an ontological ground to establish his epistemic optimism. In fact, the nature of correspondence theory is changed into the theory of identity in Avicenna's scholarship to explain the sameness of essence of the known object in the mind and the external world.

The main question of Avicenna's epistemology is how can we prove that the quiddity of an object in our mind is identical with what is in the external world? The nature of this question is the same as the problem propounded in the correspondence theory. Of course, this is not an epistemological question in Avicenna's doctrine because it refers to his ontological explication underlying the sameness between the essence of objects with mental and the external existence. But as there is not any fundamental skeptical theory in Avicenna's ontology, such question still remains incontrovertible in his epistemology.

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