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AL-'AQL AL-QUDSĪ : AVICENNA'S SUBJECTIVE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

I intend in this paper to show, through a successive series of textually based steps, that if one puts together a number of different points which Avicenna makes in connection with epistemology, one will come out with a coherent theory of knowledge which is, in a fundamental sense, subjective and unverifiable.

1. I shall introduce the topic through two passages from Avicenna's major work, *al-Shifā'*: The following passage is from the psychological part of that work:

"Amongst things that are known and evident is the fact that intelligible matters which are acquired are acquired only by means of the middle-term of a syllogism. The middle-term occurs in either of two ways. Sometimes it is intuited—where intuition is an act of the brain whereby it infers by itself the middle-term... and sometimes it is learnt. But the principals of learning are intuitions, so that things are inevitably based on intuitions which were inferred by the masters of intuition, and which were conveyed thereafter to people who learn."⁽¹⁾

(1) Although I draw exclusively on Avicenna's major work *al-Shifā'* in this paper, in fact his views as I present them here are quite consistent with his views as expressed in his other works, and in fact they are arguably even more consistent with his views as these are expressed in his mystical works. In this sense, it is arguable that it is not the case that there are two Avicennas, one rational and the second mystical, but that there is one Avicenna who once uses rational, and then mystical/poetic means to express the same views. In order to simplify the use of references in this paper, I shall use the following abbreviations:

Introduction for al-Madkhal of al-Shifā', G. C. Anawati *et al.*, eds., introduction by I. Madkour. Cairo, 1952.

Psychology for al-Nafs of al-Shifā', Ed. F. Rahman. London: Oxford University Press, 1959.

In the logical part of the same major work, Avicenna again emphasizes the central role of the middle-term in his theory of knowledge. He says,

"Judgemental knowledge-with-certainty consists in believing, regarding a thing, that it is so and in believing that it can not but be so. This (second) belief has to have occurred in such a manner that it cannot cease to be entertained. If it is self-evident, then it cannot cease to be entertained. If it is not self-evident, it would be such that it cannot cease to be entertained only if it were to have been acquired from the first occurrence of the middle-term."⁽²⁾

Thus Avicenna's theory of knowledge seems to depend, in a very fundamental sense, on the act of intuition of middle-terms. In order to arrive at the knowledge of something previously unknown—for example the relation, if it exists, between the minor and major terms—then something over and above the mere presence of these two terms seems to be necessary, namely, the intuition of a third term that connects or disconnects between them. Avicenna explains this intuition in his *De Anima* in the case where only a single person is involved, as consisting in the aptitude (*isti'dād*) to learn. He says that "this aptitude may become so intensive in some people to the extent that the person who has it will not require much in order for him to contact the Active Intellect... and this state of the material intellect must be called a holy intellect ('*aql qudsī*')"⁽³⁾

Other passages in this chapter confirm that Avicenna considered intuition to consist of varying inspirational degrees culminating in *al-'aql al-qudsī*, which is the highest of the human faculties, and which is the highest mode of prophecy. Once again, however, Avicenna emphasises the role of the middle-term in the context of prophetic knowledge (and therefore in the context of intuition) when he says that the forms (*ṣuwar*) which the holy intellect receives from the Active Intellect are arranged in such a manner as to contain the middle-terms. It is clear from the above that for Avicenna, judgemental knowledge (which is essentially the know-

On Demonstration for *al-Burhān* of *al-Shifā'*, Ed. A. E. Afifi. Cairo, 1964.
Metaphysics for *al-Ilāhiyyāt* of *al-Shifā'*, Ed. G. C. Anawati & S. Zayed. 2 vols. Cairo, 1960.

See *Psychology* 249 for the above-quoted passage.

(2) *On Demonstration* 256. This knowledge is "*al-yaqīn min al-'ilm al-laṣṭiqī*."

(3) *Psychology* 248. Note in this context that the holy intellect is the highest aspect of the material intellect.

ledge that B belongs or does not belong to A, whether wholly or in part) requires an element that is quite distinct from A and from B. Furthermore this element, namely, the middle-term, is introduced in the theory through the instrument of intuition. In its turn, intuition is a form of readiness to receive forms—one might say, to receive *inspiration*, reaching, in its highest mode, to the prophetic ability to receive *revelation*.

These two obviously fundamental aspects of Avicenna's theory of knowledge—i.e. that it is intuitive and that this intuition is or seems to be inspirational/revelational in nature—obviously give rise to the question of whether any room is left for a rational and objective assessment or verification of knowledge. In other words one is led, through a very obvious process of reasoning, to the question of whether the foundations of Avicenna's theory of knowledge, like those of al-Ghazali after him, are rooted in faith rather than in reason.

It seems to me that this can be shown to be the case if it can be shown that Avicenna's theory does not leave any room in it for a rational verification of knowledge. If an item of knowledge cannot be empirically confirmed or disconfirmed, then all that one would be left with is the inspirational light of the Active Intellect shining on us, rather analogously to the way that it was a light which God cast into his breast that provided grounds for al-Ghazali's certainty of his knowledge.⁽⁴⁾

Therefore I shall proceed to show, through what I hope will be obviously successive steps, that Avicenna did not hold knowledge to be empirically or *objectively* verifiable (i.e. capable of being confirmed or disconfirmed). This I shall do by considering two possible domains of verification, the physical or empirical, and the analytical or conceptual. All the propositions which will be used in the process will either be directly or indirectly but obviously supported by textual evidence.

2. The first Avicennian proposition to be considered here is the following: that *the roots of human knowledge are intuitions*. The passages already cited confirm the appropriateness of ascribing this view to Avicenna. By the word "roots" I simply mean the foundations from which knowledge is said to be acquired.

(4) See the English translation of his *Deliverance From Error*, in M. W. Watt's *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali* (George Allen & Unwin, London, 4th Imp. 1970), p. 25-6.

Avicenna's second proposition is this: *the source of intuitions is the Active Intellect*. Again, what I mean by the word "source" is quite literally the immediate origin of the middle-term which connects or disconnects between two other terms. By stating that this source is the Active Intellect Avicenna implicitly denies two other possible sources. The first possible source is the external world of sensible objects. The second possible source are the minor and major terms themselves between which the connection (or disconnection) is to be made. Avicenna says,

"It is possible then that a person be so supported in his soul by the intensity of purity, and the intensity of contact with the intellectual principles that he is set aglow with intuition, that is, with the acceptability of them from the Active Intellect in everything. The forms in the Active Intellect will then be depicted in him either instantaneously or almost instantaneously, not in a traditional manner but in a manner which contains the middle-terms."⁽⁵⁾

This clearly shows that the act of intuition has its source not in the sensible objects of the external world, but in the Active Intellect itself. In sum, then, the first two propositions say that to know is to intuit, and to intuit is to be ready to receive or to accept connections between ideas from the Active Intellect.

These two propositions seem to imply a further thesis, namely, that the subject-matter of knowledge has to be distinct from the external world of sensible objects. Because, if knowledge is defined in terms of the intuition of a connection or disconnection or disagreement between two ideas (or between the major and minor terms), then the *primary* objects of knowledge come by definition and perforce to be precisely those ideas (or those terms), instead of the physical objects of the external world. In its turn, what such a thesis would amount to is the subjectivist claim that what we have direct access to, and what we can hold direct or primary discourse about are mental entities rather than objects in the external world. Re-phrased, this implied thesis can now be stated as Avicenna's *third* proposition, as follows: *the primary objects of knowledge are forms in the human intellect*.

Besides this being a clear implication from the first two propositions, it is in fact directly supported by the following textual evidence from Avicenna's metaphysical work in *al-Shifā'*:

(5) *Psychology* 249-50. Also, see below, No. 22 for a comment on "being aglow with intuition".

"It is clear that the object of information must have some kind of existence in the soul, and information *in reality* is about what exists in the soul, and it is only *secondarily* about sensible objects in the external world."⁽⁶⁾—my emphases.

In fact, Avicenna's third proposition can be supported by a number of correlated theses which he presents in his works, including his distinction between the pair, particular/universal and the pair, part/whole (*kullī/juz'ī* vs. the pair *kull/juz'*), or between accidental (*'araḍī*) and accident (*'araḍ*), etc., where he constantly stresses the difference between, say, particulars and universals on the one hand as logical objects which are defined entirely in terms of logical specifications, and between parts and wholes on the other hand which are nothing other than substances and the matter and form which constitutes them.⁽⁷⁾ A substance in the external world would be constituted of matter and form, but because neither of these are predicable of substances, and because, in contrast, it is particulars that play the role of subjects in propositions, a distinction immediately appears in the Avicennian model between the particular as a subject of predication (and therefore as the object of information or of knowledge), and the substance—i.e., the actual physical object—as a whole (*kull*) which is made up of the parts form and matter.

We can now proceed to the *fourth* proposition: we have said that the primary objects of knowledge are mental entities, and

(6) *Metaphysics* 34.

(7) *Introduction*, *passim* for the distinction between, e.g., accident (*'araḍ*) and accident-as-predicate (*'araḍī*). Avicenna's concern is to distinguish between logical means of specification and of discourse on the one hand, and material attributes or qualities inhering in physical objects on the other. He argues that there is a set of terms (particular, universal, being-a-genus, accident-as-predicate, etc.) used in logical discourse which specify logical entities. These entities do not exist in the material world. Avicenna returns especially to the distinction between the pair part/whole and the pair particular/universal in *Metaphysics* 207ff. His comments in this context are very illuminating. A physical object in the external world is constituted of matter and form. Thus matter and form are parts of the object. The object itself is a whole. In this sense, a whole (*kull*) is not a particular (*juz'ī*), and a universal (*kullī*) is not a part (*juz'*). However, since it is the particular which is the logical object of specification, and since it is through the universal that the particular is specified, it is perforce not the physical object which comes to present itself as our immediate object of knowledge. Note in this context that the distinction between *'araḍ* and *'araḍī* already prepares the ground for this thesis. The predicate which is both *'araḍī* and *kullī*, is not the form (*ṣūrah*) which is both a *'araḍ* and a *juz'*.

we have seen that at least one category of such entities (the middle-term) is not rooted in the physical world, but has its source rather in the Active Intellect. The question that may now be raised is whether the source of the other categories of mental entities is not the physical world. Another way of looking at this is to wonder whether the intelligible objects of knowledge which one acquires are acquired from the physical world in so far as they exist in it. However, Avicenna's answer to this may be expressed as follows, namely, that *quiddities/intelligibles do not exist in the external world of sensible objects*. This is a rather prominent feature of Avicenna's philosophy, and it distinguishes him from any other philosophers in the Islamic tradition, including al-Fārābī.⁽⁸⁾ He continually repeats this dictum in a number of places, as for example when he says,

(8) The following is a brief summary of al-Fārābī's view, as this is presented in his "Epistle Concerning the Intellect", ed. M. Bouygues (Beyrouth: Imprimerie Catholique, 1948), pp. 3-37: there is a gradual and rational procession of the human intellect in its pursuit of knowledge, which can be described in terms of four distinct stages.

First, the human intellect can be a potential intellect in the sense of its being "a certain soul, or part of a soul, or one of the faculties of the soul, or something whose essence (*dhātu*) has been prepared, or is prepared to extract (*tantazi*) the quiddities (*māhiyyāt*) of all existents, and their forms without their matter, thus making them a form, or forms for it..." (p. 12). al-Fārābī states that these quiddities which are extractable from objects, and which have not yet been extracted by a potential intellect, are potential objects of the intellect themselves, or potential intelligibles (*ma'qūlāt bi 'l-quwwah*). In this first stage, therefore, the quiddities are potential intelligibles, and the intellect is a potential intellect.

Second, "...once the forms of existents occur in (that) essence in the manner we have described, then that essence becomes an intellect-in-act..." (p. 15). In this second state, therefore, the human intellect has in fact extracted the forms of existents, and has for that reason become an actual intellect rather than being a mere potential intellect. However, al-Fārābī further states that the forms or quiddities which are now actual objects of thought of the intellect-in-act are for that reason no longer potential intelligibles, but actual intelligibles. In this second stage, therefore, the human intellect is an actual intellect, and the quiddities or forms are actual intelligibles.

Third, the quiddities or forms which are now actual intelligibles are separate existents in their own right, in so far as they are independent objects of thought, and no longer mere shadows of the objects from which they were extracted. In so far as they are separate existents in their own right, they can themselves be intellect, now as actual intelligibles. "When the intellect-in-act intellects those intelligibles which are forms for it in so far as they are actual intelligibles, then the intellect about which we used first to say that it is an intellect in act now becomes the acquired intellect." (p. 20). In this stage, therefore, the human intellect has

"There is no single common man-ness which exists in the external world which is such that it is the man-ness of Zayd and of 'Amr."⁽⁹⁾

This fourth proposition makes it senseless of course to speculate on whether the source of intelligibles is the sensible world, as it is obvious from the fact that they do not exist in the sensible world that they cannot be acquired from it. Avicenna's answer to the question, where, then, do intelligibles come from? can be expressed in the following fifth proposition: *Intelligibles are not extracted or derived from sensible objects in the sensible world. Rather, they are received from the Active Intellect*. We can find textual evidence in support of this proposition in the following comments:

"If the theoretical faculty regards the particulars which are in the imagination, and the light of the Active Intellect shines on them in us as we have stated, then they change into being abstracted from matter and its concomitants, and they become imprinted in the rational soul—not in the sense that *they themselves* become transported from the imagination to the intellect in us... but in the sense that observing them prepares the soul to receive what is abstract from the Active Intellect which emanates it."⁽¹⁰⁾ (my emphasis)

become a second-order actual intellect, while the object of intellection has become a second-order actual intelligible.

Fourth, the stage of reaching the acquired intellect is the final one in the process of intellectual ascension. "At this stage, the substance (*jawhar*) of the human being, or the human being *qua* being of the substance he is, becomes the closest thing to the Active Intellect. This is ultimate happiness and the after-life, namely, that the last stage of the human being as a substance occurs to him, and his final perfection occurs to him." (p. 31). al-Fārābī defines the Active Intellect as that power or cause by virtue of which the potential intellect can gradually ascend to becoming the acquired intellect. He uses the sun-image to explain that the Active Intellect provides light *both* so that the eye can see, and the object can be seen. He says that the intelligibles, forms or quiddities which constitute the subject-matter of the human intellect are potentially present in the Active Intellect *in the sense that* "...the Active Intellect has the capability of making (*yaj'aluhā*) these forms in matter...". "Thus it is the Active Intellect which makes these forms in matter, and it then gradually seeks (*yelaharrā*) to make them approximate to separability until the acquired intellect occurs." (p. 31).

(9) *Psychology* 237.

(10) *Ibid.* 235. According to the picture as Avicenna presents it, physical objects in the external world provide our sensory apparatus with particular images which have not been totally freed of material concomitants. However, it is not from these images that universals are extracted. Rather, the occurrence of these images in us prepares us to acquire the universal whose actual source is quiddity within the Active Intellect.

In sum, therefore, the above five propositions indicate that the direct or primary objects of knowledge are mental entities; that the direct source of these entities is the Active Intellect; that the connections or disconnections between these entities are based on intuitions, and that these intuitions also have their immediate source in the Active Intellect.

From these five propositions, with which Avicennian scholars are mostly familiar, I would now like to move on to the conclusion which I wish to draw, namely, that we cannot, in the Avicennian model, verify our knowledge by an appeal to the external world of sensible objects. This conclusion seems to me to obviously deducible from the above propositions. Nevertheless, there are two points that are worth saying regarding it:

a. In order to check to see whether there is any correspondence between our items of knowledge and the external world, we should have to have immediate access to both domains, that is, to the domain of our objects of knowledge and to that of the external world of sensible objects. However, direct access to the second of these two domains is totally lacking in the Avicennian model. The objects of our knowledge are our ideas, and these perforce stand between us and the external world, making the external world one step removed from us. In practical terms, what this means is that direct comparison with the external world (and hence verifiability) becomes impossible.

b. Alternatively, for a comparison with physical objects to make any sense we ought at least to be able to compare between our items of knowledge (our ideas) on the one hand, and items that have been extracted or deduced from the physical world (material images) on the other hand, especially given our inability to check against the objects themselves that exist in the physical world. However, we are once again barred from doing this in the Avicennian model by virtue of the fact that what Avicenna allows to be extractable from the physical world, namely, images of particulars, do not contain in them the quiddity of which they are supposed to partake. While the image of a particular prepares the intellect to receive the abstract idea from above, there is nothing in this image with which to compare the abstract form to see whether there is correspondence or not. At the very most, on the Avicennian account, there is mere conjunction or coincidence of the image and the form, and this upper limit falls short, it would seem, of the required correspondence. Obviously, there would not

be empirical verifiability in mere coincidence. Indeed, Avicenna's own definition of correspondence in his metaphysical work emphasizes his view that the relationship between image and form is that of coincidence, even though it goes by the name "correspondence". He says,

"What makes this mental form a universal is its relation to matters outside in the sense that, with respect to any of these external matters which are presented to the mind first, it is possible that this very form should occur from it. If one such external matter were to be presented to the mind first, and the soul were to be affected by it in this manner, then its successor would not have a new effect on the soul except in so far as it has this possibility. Because, this effect would be like the form of the predecessor, abstracted from accidents. This is correspondence."⁽¹¹⁾

What Avicenna seems to be saying here is that once a mental image (an external matter which is presented to the mind) serves as the basis on which the intellect is able to receive the abstract from the Active Intellect, then correspondence would consist, not in a one-to-one correspondence (or mirror-relationship) between this abstract form on the one hand and the various images of particulars on the other, but in successor images containing in them a possibility or potentiality factor, namely, that they are such that if they were to have occurred to the mind first then they would have played the same role as the first image. Avicenna's passage neither makes out correspondence in the proper sense to exist between the first image and the form (because the relationship there is that of mere conjunction or coincidence), nor yet between the various individual images (because none of them

(11) *Metaphysics* 210. Also *Psychology* 237. The theory presented here by Avicenna is a substitute for what might be called the "classical" view regarding the acquisition of universals/forms/meanings, as this is presented by various Islamic-era philosophers, including al-Fārābī. According to the classical view, one abstracts the universal from the particular—indeed, the universal is itself the form which exists in the physical object. One abstracts this universal/form either upon seeing one particular in which that form inheres, or upon seeing several such particulars which share that form. Avicenna has to find an alternative explanation for the acquisition of a universal, because his thesis is that one acquires the universal directly from its origin, so to speak, and not via the mediation of the physical object. Therefore, what he says is (a) that the occurrence of the particular image occasions the occurrence of the universal in the mind; and (b) that any particular image can belong to the same class (i.e. occasion the same universal) if one can attribute to it, not the possession of that universal, but the dispositional ability to occasion that universal had it been presented to the mind first.

contains the form in the first place), nor, finally, between the form and the successor images.

In sum, therefore, the intuitive and subjective nature of Avicenna's theory of knowledge makes an appeal to the external world (i.e. to physical objects and the images extracted from them) for the verifiability of this knowledge a definitionally hopeless enterprise.

3. I should now like to proceed to the second major part of this paper, where I hope to show that Avicenna's theory of knowledge makes it also and equally impossible to verify one's knowledge analytically, or by an appeal to the world of ideas (or of quiddities, etc.).

At this juncture, it would be useful to present the following as the *sixth* Avicennian proposition, namely *that quiddities or essences, considered just as themselves, subsist rather than exist*. This is the same as saying that to be an essence in the Avicennian model is not the same as to be an existent. I use the word "subsist" here in order to indicate a state of being which is distinct from either mental or material existence (or from existence either in the external world or in the soul). Thus Avicenna says.

"Quiddities of things may be in the external world, or they may be in conception. Thus they have three considerations. The consideration of quiddity in so far as it is that quiddity, and without being related to either of these two kinds of existence ..., a consideration of it in so far as it exists in the external world ..., and a consideration of it in so far as it is in conception ..." (12)

This passage from Avicenna postulates some kind of being or consideration which quiddities as quiddities have, which is distinct from existence in the soul or in the external world. Taking into account the distinction Avicenna makes generally between "being-a-thing" (or *shay'*) and "being-an-existent" (or *mawjūd*), one can perhaps attribute thing-ness to quiddities and go on to claim that while such quiddities are things they are not necessarily, and for that reason, also existents. Being things, they would at least subsist rather than be absolutely in every sense of the word "non-existent". Such quiddities, we may also assume, are what subsist in the Active Intellect.

(12) Introduction 15.

The distinction between subsistence and existence is of vital logical importance. Because, disregarding the distinction between natural and mathematical objects or quiddities, a legitimate question that can be raised is the following, namely, do quiddities-in-subsistence have relations amongst themselves which can serve as a standard to verify the relations which are postulated as existing or as obtaining in quiddities-in-existence? Put differently we may ask the question whether quiddities-in-subsistence are for Avicenna Platonic Forms serving as an ultimate verifiability standard? (13)

The answer in the negative to this question is attested by the following two propositions, if one takes them in conjunction. First, we may state the *seventh* Avicennian proposition as follows, *that specificities and accidents come to appertain to quiddities-in-existence*. Avicenna says,

"... each one of the two (kinds of) existence becomes fixed after the quiddity has been fixed, and each one of the two (kinds of) existence attaches specificities and accidents to the quiddity as it exists in that manner which may no be present for it as it exists in the other manner." (14)

This passage quite clearly indicates that a quiddity-in-subsistence would differ, strictly speaking, from a quiddity-in-existence in so far as the quiddity-in-existence would have attachments belonging to it by virtue of the fact that it is in that existence. Strictly speaking, in other words, analogously to the way a distinction was made out between a mental image and a

(13) Avicenna attacks Platonic forms quite ferociously, when he says they are false and useless—*On Demonstration* 233. What is the difference, then, between a Platonic form which is such an object of criticism, and a quiddity subsisting in the Active Intellect? The answer, it would seem, is that a Platonic form is part of an essence-constituted order. Forms are essentially related or unrelated with each other. In its turn, such an essentially-constituted order is an order of necessity. For Avicenna, to have entities necessarily related with each other is unobjectionable, but only if such necessariness is an external modification which comes to appertain to an object. To say that something is necessarily what it is because of its essence, that is, because of something within itself, is to contradict the basic Avicennian tenet that entities are merely possible with respect to themselves.

A quiddity-in-subsistence is therefore for Avicenna such a "purified" entity that it can causally lend itself to any number of logical "manifestations" on the existential levels, and is not essentially bound to any single one of them.

(14) Introduction 34.

form, a distinction can also be made out between a form existing in the soul and a form subsisting in the Active Intellect. This, notwithstanding the fact that a quiddity-in-existence has its origin in the Active Intellect. However, this passage also indicates that existence furnishes objects with specificities and accidents that may not belong to them if they are merely in subsistence. The *eighth* and last proposition, on the other hand, categorically denies that any specificities or accidents can belong to quiddities-in-subistence in the first place. This proposition can be stated in the following way: *Unity, and all other descriptions and relations that follow upon unity, and are dependent on it do not appertain to quiddities-in-subistence.*

This is, perhaps, the most confounding of Avicenna's theses. But it is undoubtedly a thesis which he held. Many passages attest this, of which I choose the following:

"In so far as a universal is a universal, it is something. In so far as it is a thing to which universality appertains, it is something ... If it were to be Man or Horse, then there would be something other than universality, which is horseness. Because, the definition of horseness is not the definition of universality, nor does universality enter into the definition of horseness ... because, in itself, it is nothing at all but horseness. In itself, it is neither one nor many, nor does it exist in the external world nor in the soul, nor does it exist in any of these forms whether potentially or actually in such a way that such (descriptions) would then enter into the definition of horseness. Rather, in so far as it is itself, it is horseness only. Even unity is a description which comes to be associated with horseness, such that horseness becomes a one with this description..."⁽¹⁵⁾

The only positive statement which is present about horseness in this passage is that it is nothing at all but itself, that is, that it is self-identical. Indeed, given such a quiddity-in-subistence, it is impossible to give a definition or a description, either of *what* this horseness is, or of what it might become. Thus, even describing horseness as a kind of animalness does not seem admissible on the basis of this passage. Nor is this extreme negativity concerning quiddities-in-subistence strange: if it is assumed that even unity (or to be singled out or individuated as a thing) is an accident to horseness, and is not part of what horseness is, then it would not at all be clear where horseness as horseness starts and where it ends. Obviously, if this much is not clear, nor would it be clear how to distinguish between horseness and anything else.

(15) *Metaphysics* 196.

This rather extreme position of Avicenna throws a new light, I think, on what he meant by the distinction between possible and necessary, and the associated distinction between essence and existence. Because, if it is not already clearly part of the definition of horseness what it is, or what it is potentially, then its being possible with respect to itself need not only mean that it can come to exist, but it can also and more significantly mean that it can come to exist in any number of logically possible fashions. The ambiguous nature of quiddities-in-subistence is attested by the following passage:

"If someone were to ask, 'Is the man-ness in Zayd, in so far as it is man-ness, the same as that in 'Amr?' he could not but answer in the negative. Nor would it follow from his having given this answer than he can conclude that this man-ness and that man-ness are numerically one. Because, when he answered negatively, he answered absolutely, meaning that this man-ness in so far as it is man-ness, is only man-ness. Its being something which is not in 'Amr is a matter which appertains to it from outside (of its being man-ness).'"⁽¹⁶⁾

Again, therefore, we are being told that man-ness as man-ness is just that, and to say anything whether positively or negatively about it is to think of it in terms of accidents which appertain to it from outside of itself. Avicennian scholars are familiar with his claims⁽¹⁷⁾ that the specifications of being a genus or a species, of being a universal or a particular, etc. are logical appertures which come to appertain to concepts or quiddities in so far as there are being entertained by the mind, or in so far as they are posited as existing.

Returning now to the main argument, it seems possible to draw the following conclusion from the sixth, seventh and eighth propositions, that it is by definition impossible to verify one's knowledge analytically, or by an appeal, that is, to the domain of pure essences or meanings. The impossibility in this case is far more evident than in the first case, because if there are no relations or connections between pure meanings (quiddities-in-subistence) in the first place, it would be futile to suggest that these meanings can serve as a standard to check the relations and connections which appertain to quiddities-in-existence.

In conjunction, the two different conclusions which I have drawn from the various above-stated propositions can now be

(16) *Ibid.* 198.

(17) *Introduction*, *passim*.

stated as the single thesis that knowledge cannot be verified rationally at all.

4. I should now like to make a few general comments and to draw a few general and corollary conclusions from Avicenna's main epistemic thesis as I have presented it:

a. Avicenna's subjectivist thesis may at first seem inconsistent with his writings and practices in the field of medical inquiry. However, to be a subjectivist in this sense is not necessarily to be anti-empiricist or anti-inductivist. On the contrary, to be a subjectivist in this sense is to appreciate fully the limits of the empirical or inductive methods, not as a prelude to dispose of these methods, but as a basis of understanding the limitations imposed on Man's epistemic ability.⁽¹⁸⁾

b. As I have outlined it, Avicenna's theory of knowledge seems more like a theory of opinion or belief rather than of knowledge properly so-called. If one makes out a distinction between knowledge and opinion on the basis that what is verifiable comes under the first heading and what is unverifiable (but can be held with certainty) falls under the second, then it becomes evident that Avicenna denies knowledge strictly so-called. On the other hand, that he does deny knowledge properly so-called may explain the otherwise rather strange passage at the introduction of his major work, where he states:

"...the aim of theoretical philosophy is the belief in an opinion that is not an action, while the aim of practical philosophy is the knowledge of an opinion which is in an action. Thus it is more appropriate to assign theoretical philosophy to opinion."⁽¹⁹⁾

This rather strange passage in which Avicenna substitutes opinion for knowledge as the aim of theoretical philosophy is confirmed

(18) My attention was first drawn to the problem which my interpretation of Avicenna's epistemic theory may raise when I read a first draft of this paper to the Society for the Study of Islamic Philosophy and Science at its convention in San Francisco, 1980. I later used an invitation to speak at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem in commemoration of Avicenna's bicentennial (1980) to deliver a paper on Avicenna's medical methods. A version of the paper later appeared under the title "Avicenna: medicine and Scepticism", *Koroth*, Vol. 8, No. 1-2, 1981, pp. 9*-20*. In this paper, I try to show that my interpretation of Avicenna's theory of knowledge is consistent with his introductory general and philosophical remarks concerning method which appear in his famous medical corpus.

(19) *Introduction* 12.

once again later on this major work (see below). It is enlightening in this context to contrast between Aristotle's clear distinction between knowledge and belief, and Avicenna's amalgamation of them under the heading of opinion:

Aristotle: "Knowledge and its object differ from opinion and its object in that knowledge is of the universal and proceeds by necessary propositions; and that which is necessary cannot be otherwise; but there are some propositions which, though true and real, are also capable of being otherwise. Obviously, it is not knowledge that is concerned with these ... nor is it intuition ... therefore ... it is opinion that is concerned with that which is true or false and which may be otherwise."⁽²⁰⁾

Avicenna: "It is known that something can either be known to be so, or thought to be so; that the difference between them is in respect of certainty and worry; that they both fall under opinion, and that there are similarities and analogies between them."⁽²¹⁾

c. Avicenna's theory of knowledge differs markedly from any "classical" Islamic philosophy theory of it, and a cursory reading of, say, al-Fārābī's "Epistle on the Intellect" will immediately reveal this difference. On the other hand, there are striking similarities between Avicenna's theory and al-Ghazali's statement to the effect that it is ultimately a light which God chooses to cast in a man's breast that lends confidence to one's claims to knowledge. But while al-Ghazali significantly reverts to the established edifice of knowledge after deep soul-searching, Avicenna presents or produces a different kind of edifice to the one classically held, by stipulating various qualitative and quantitative degrees of difference in readiness to intuit, ranging from a near absence of such readiness, through various degrees of being inspired, and culminating in the holy faculty and revelation. In this sense, the prophetic faculty undoubtedly ranks as the highest of human faculties.⁽²²⁾

d. Besides the fact that Avicenna thought that true or complete knowledge can only be acquired after death (which seems to imply the exclusion of the acquisition of such knowledge by a living

(20) Aristotle 88b30ff.

(21) *On Demonstration* 256.

(22) Avicenna's theory seems to be that individuals differ from each other in any number of ways, from being totally incapable of intuiting middle-terms to being so endowed as to have a genius-type capacity to intuit middle-terms both quickly and severally. Therefore, the speed at which one intuits a middle-term is a function of an individual's epistemic standard, as well as the number of middle-terms which one intuits. Thus to be aglow with intuition is to be able to intuit as many middle-terms as are relevant as speedily as possible.

prophet), *al-quwwah al-qudsiyyah* is itself addressed merely to quiddities-in-existence as a faculty for intuiting middle-terms which connect or disconnect between such quiddities or ideas.⁽²³⁾ Indeed, being a faculty whose role is to be concerned with connections and relations, it is perforce addressed away from those quiddities which subsist in the Active Intellect, and amongst which no relations or otherwise obtain. Furthermore, where Avicenna does talk about what he seems to consider as true knowledge, it is not knowledge of quiddities as such which seems to be important, but something quite different. To be one endowed with intellectual wisdom, he says, is to be "one in which is depicted the form of the whole, the intellected organization of the whole, and the flowing goodness in the whole... such that one becomes an intelligible world which corresponds with the existing world in its entirety, beholding the vision of absolute elegance, absolute goodness and absolute true beauty, and such that one becomes conjoined with it, imprinted by its form and shape, absorbed in its fibre and metamorphosed into a substance which is like it."⁽²⁴⁾

e. This brings me to the final point which I wish to make by way of a brief summary: unlike the "rationalists" of his day, Avicenna seems to have believed that human/material knowledge is by definition quite limited and inferior. In order to arrive at true knowledge, one has to free oneself from all ties with the material world—indeed one has to free oneself from one's intellect, and become a *nafs* belonging to the after-world. Real knowledge there is quite distinct from this-wordly knowledge.

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(23) In the last few chapters in Avicenna's *Metaphysics*, he expresses his view quite clearly that real knowledge and real happiness are attainable only in the after-life, when one has shed all affiliations with the material world. In this context, perhaps Avicenna's insistence on distinguishing between soul (*nafs*) and intellect (*'aql*) is to do with the fact that according to him it is through the former, and not the latter, that one attains penultimate knowledge and happiness, as it is the former which survives in the afterlife. This is a clear departure from the "classical" view, for example as expressed by al-Fārābī.

As for the holy intellect/faculty, this is obviously a material faculty pertaining to individuals during their life-time. Also, as connections and disconnections between ideas are a function of these ideas' existence either in the soul or in the external world, so the holy faculty is a faculty that addresses itself to the world of existence.

(24) *Metaphysics* 426.