



Late Islamic Philosophy and Knowledge by Presence

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Abstract

Some of the contemporary advocates of Islamic Philosophy believe that the view of the modern Islamic philosophers regarding knowledge by presence can solve some of the issues present in the theory of knowledge. The origins of this belief are probably two popular theories: Allama Tabatabai's view that acquired knowledge comes back to knowledge by presence and Ayatollah Misbah Yazdi's view regarding the reference of basic axioms to knowledge by presence. According to the first view, all acquired knowledge is rooted in knowledge by presence. The main issue is regarding sensory beliefs and the circumstances of the justified relationship between sensory experience on one hand and sensory beliefs on the other; however, in this theory, no explanation has been provided regarding how knowledge by presence can be converted to acquire knowledge which has been derived from it. Therefore, this view does not help in solving that important issue. Similarly, according to Ayatollah Misbah's view, the guarantee of the validity of basic axioms is because they are based on knowledge by presence. However, various reasons show knowledge by presence cannot provide the validity guarantee for basic axioms.



Keywords

Knowledge by presence, acquired knowledge, analytic proposition, basic axioms.

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Introduction

Allama Tabatabai considered all human acquired knowledge to be preceded by knowledge by presence. According to this view, forms can't emerge in the mind without knowledge by presence regarding objects. Similarly, Ayatollah Misbah Yazdi, while searching for a solution to overcome the Skeptical challenges of Modern Philosophy, considers all basic axioms to be of the category of analytic propositions and believes our knowledge of them arises from knowledge by presence. These two views among the advocates of contemporary Islamic Philosophy in Iran probably resulted in the belief that turning attention to the infallible knowledge by presence would help considerably in solving important epistemological issues – which are rooted in Western modern philosophy. In this article, I will show that these two views cannot provide the intended epistemological role for knowledge by presence. Regardless of the right or wrongness of Allama Tabatabai's view about acquired knowledge being rooted in knowledge by presence, it is ineffective regarding the cognitive value of acquired knowledge. Besides, Ayatollah Misbah Yazdi's view regarding the knowledge by presence roots of our knowledge of basic axioms faces many problems.

Knowledge by Presence, the Root of Acquired Knowledge

According to Allama Tabatabai's view, man's mind does not have the power to create something from nothing and therefore, it cannot create forms from itself. Thus, all mental forms – whether conceptual or testimonial – are preceded by knowledge by presence and immediate findings of things. The form building system converts this knowledge by presence into mental forms that denote things and thus acquired knowledge arises.

The problem is that some of our testimonials regarding external objects are clearly wrong or are sensory illusions. Therefore, the aforementioned view does not provide proof for the infallibility of our sensory beliefs and thus, does not play any special cognitive role for knowledge by presence. Moreover, since knowledge by presence is not of the category of propositions, the question arises as to “how something that lacks a structure similar to the propositional structure can provide a reason and justification for related beliefs?” This is one version of the challenges that the advocates of the Coherentist Theory in contemporary epistemology have suggested for the Foundationalism Theory. Ayatollah Misbah Yazdi and some others have tried to overcome this challenge by providing explanations for sense-datum and how they can be false without confronting the challenge directly. However, the aforementioned explanation does not include something that would eliminate

the problem of dissimilitude between the findings of knowledge by presence and propositional structures.

Basic Axioms refer back to Knowledge by Presence

Based on Ayatollah Misbah Yazdi's view, if we can achieve something concerning basic axiom propositions that would guarantee their truth; in this case, we have overcome the Skeptical challenges regarding metaphysical and philosophical issues. Reflection on these propositions shows that firstly, they are all analytical and secondly, the concepts utilized in them are taken from knowledge by presence. Therefore, both the parts of the propositions and the relationship between these parts – because they are analytical – come under the domain of our direct knowledge. As a result, based on the fact that we find the rightness of basic axioms through the infallible knowledge by presence, there remains no doubt regarding their validity.

An essential problem of this view is its inner contradictions since, on one hand, to solve the Skeptical challenge it considers basic axioms to be analytical and on the other hand, believes them to be based on knowledge by presence. These two ways are in some way incompatible and ultimately, none can be beneficial in overcoming the Skeptical challenge alone.

Conclusion

This article shows that firstly, in contrast to the common conception, Western contemporary epistemology is not heedless of knowledge by presence. Secondly, focusing on knowledge by presence is not particularly helpful in solving the problem of cognitive matters. Islamic contemporary philosophers can only defend the prevalent belief regarding the specific role of knowledge by presence in epistemology if they confront the cognitive issues in front of them directly.

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