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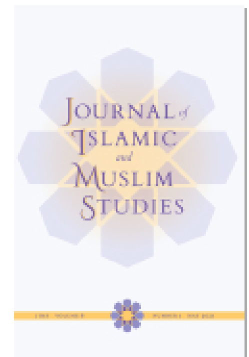

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Book Reviews

Analytic Philosophy and Avicenna: Knowing the Unknown

Mohammad Azadpur
New York: Routledge, 2020. Viii + 128 Pages.

Recent years have witnessed a revival, and even a defense, of traditional, non-modern epistemologies. One thinks of Robert Pasnau's *After Certainty*, which shows what is wrong with contemporary epistemology by arguing that the narrow epistemic ideals to which modern philosophers subscribe are unattainable.[1] In a similar vein, in his recent *Platonism and Naturalism*, Lloyd Gerson defends Platonism against the anti-representationalism (the possibility of attaining truthful representations in the sciences) of Richard Rorty by establishing the explanatory role of the superordinate first principle of all, the Idea of the Good.[2] In its own way, Mohammad Azadpur's groundbreaking book makes a strong case for Avicenna's (d. 1037) anti-naturalist account of perception vis-à-vis some of the limitations of contemporary Anglo-American discussions in empirical knowledge and sensory intentionality. In particular, the book engages in a constructive dialogue between Avicenna and such major twentieth-century analytic philosophers as Wilfrid Sellars and John McDowell. Judged from its philosophical sophistication and philological precision, the book must be regarded as a major study of Avicenna that sheds new light on the contemporary relevance of one of the greatest thinkers of all time. Since the book presents a highly nuanced account of Avicennian epistemology, I shall first provide a sketch of its chapter outlines, before proceeding to engage with some of its key arguments.

The first chapter examines Sellars's attack on the so-called "the Myth of the Given" concerning the foundation of empirical knowledge. This idea itself goes back to the Cartesian dualism of mind and world, and to the argument that the world somehow gives itself to us in a way that we can understand. For Sellars, the epistemological *Given* encompasses various empiricist views, according to which knowledge is grounded in *non-inferential* knowledge of matter-of-fact. According to the Myth, *non-inferential* knowledge is foundational in that it is not justified by a more basic form of knowledge. Sellars challenges this account by arguing that knowledge requires concepts, and since concepts are linguistic entities, an initiation into the linguistic space of reasons is what enables us to establish *non-inferential* knowledge. Chapter 2 investigates Sellars's account of the pseudo-intentionality of sense impressions and its relation to the cognitive order. Appropriating Franz Brentano's seminal concept of "intentionality" (i.e., object-directedness), Sellars distinguishes between pseudo-intentionality and genuine intentionality in relation to both sense impressions and the cognitive order. Sellars's psychological nominalism leads him to a naturalistic account of intentionality that conforms to his scientism, according to which progress in science leads to a more accurate representation of the world.

Chapter 3 discusses Sellars's scientism in relation to his distinct version of *philosophia perennis*. This chapter defends the argument that the "manifest image" (i.e., our commonsense experience of the world) of things is real but constantly refined through scientific progress. Importantly, Azadpur claims that Sellarsian perennialism, in tandem with McDowell's revision of the Myth of the Given, enables us to resist the debilitating effects of scientism on our knowledge of the world. In Chapter 4, Azadpur argues that Avicenna is in agreement with Sellars regarding the naturalistic fallacy of the Myth of the Given, since he, too, grounds *non-inferential* factual knowledge in conceptual sensory experience. However, Sellars claims that sensory experience is non-relationally intentional, whereas, Avicenna assigns a relational intentionality to the senses due to the intellect's involvement in sensory perception. Chapter 5 delves into the deeper dimensions of Avicenna's philosophy of mind and his complex view of experience. It argues that in contrast to the Sellarsian space of reasons, Avicenna's account of cognition reaches all the way out to sensory impingements (cf. similar views in McDowell's *Mind and World*).[3] In Azadpur's view, this particular reading of Avicenna contributes to McDowell's refined epistemology, as it develops an account of the categorial unity of the space of reasons through modifying Aristotle's substance ontology. The concluding chapter defends Avicenna's perennialism against the criticism that Avicenna's appeal to the mediation of the Active Intellect shows his commitment to medieval metaphysical assumptions.

In Azadpur's view, Avicenna shares Sellars's epistemological insight that *non-inferential* factual knowledge is grounded in our conceptual sensory experience.

Yet, this does not make the Avicennian position vulnerable to Donald Davidson's rejection of the scheme-content dualism that undermines Sellars's (and Quine's) view that there is a world independent of our conceptual schemes, a world which is revealed to us through progress in the natural sciences. For Sellars's position, Azadpur grants that it tends to suffer from a species of Cartesian mind-body dualism when seen ontologically, and hence he sides with Davidson in arguing for the incoherence of the scheme-content dualism since we always have the real world in view when thinking about objects of knowledge. But the Avicennian position, as Azadpur takes care to point out, is in agreement with the Davidsonian view that the world is already implicated in our cognition of it, although, for Avicenna, it is the world of ordinary commonsense experience, and not the disenchanted world of science, as it is for Davidson and others. As such, Azadpur makes clear that there is an important difference between the Avicennian and the Davidsonian position, since for the latter the world is already in view only non-conceptually. In contrast, Avicenna contends that our minds are already operative in the construction of sensory experience. Azadpur affirms that such a view avoids the Davidsonian scheme-content dualism by having a *conceptualized* world from the start (p. 42).

Next, Azadpur fleshes out the differences between Avicenna's and Sellars's accounts of intentionality. In contrast to Sellars, Avicenna assigns a genuine cognitive intentionality to sense perception. Drawing on Aristotle's account of "proper sensibles," Avicenna argues that sensory experience makes use of primary concepts and allows entities to reveal themselves and to provide the ground for our knowledge (pp. 47–48). As Azadpur shows, for Avicenna the unity of the Sellarsian logical space of reasons is attained in a separately existing intellect. More importantly, this reading of Avicenna allows Azadpur to add to the McDowellian critique of Sellars, who ascribes only a non-relational intentionality to the sensory, thereby privileging the "scientific image" over the "manifest image" (p. 82). It should be noted that for Sellars, all knowledge, including all awareness, is a linguistic affair. Sellars's empiricist epistemology does not allow him to make a claim for a preconceptual and prelinguistic awareness or knowledge. In contrast, Avicenna argues that empirical knowledge is subject to a pre-existing knowledge that already operates in our sensory experience as a *this-such* nexus. For Avicenna, "the propositional content of our empirical judgments is a discursive articulation of the intelligibles (as emanated by the Active Intellect) in sensory perception" (p. 68).

Azadpur also untangles important dimensions of Avicennian epistemology such as the role of "consciousness," which permeates every movement of the soul/self (*nafs*) as it comes to know itself and the world. For Avicenna, the rational soul is the separately existing subject of self-awareness. In line with an Aristotelian framework, the soul *qua* actuality of a body thinks in the sense

of having the intelligible form (i.e., being informed), but as it is in a physical composite, the *in-formed* part cannot be the part that is conscious of the presence of the form. Therefore, in order for the self-conscious soul and the *in-formed* soul to be one, the real subject of thinking has to be separate from the body, incorruptible and thus immortal (p. 97).

Accordingly, Avicenna improves on the Aristotelian conception of the intellect, which can be vague at times. The acquisition of knowledge requires bringing the soul's potentialities into actuality. In the process, the material intellect (*al-ʿaql al-hayulānī*) or the power that prepares the rational soul for receiving the primary intelligibles is transformed into the acquired intellect (*al-āql al-mustafād*), enabling the soul to know the intelligibles whenever it desires. It is important to note that the transformation of the theoretical intellect from its lowest degree to the highest takes place by means of the Active Intellect. In this context, Azadpur also engages various Avicenna scholars such as Dimitri Gutas, Dag Hasse, and Deborah Black, and targets those who interpret Avicenna's epistemology in line with Lockean empiricism (most notably, Gutas). For these scholars, meanings are abstracted from a non-conceptual transaction between our senses and the world, leading to a version of the Myth of the Given (i.e., empirical knowledge results from the mind's innate ability [*fiṭra*]) (pp. 70–73). In contrast to Gutas et al., who claim that the universal intelligible forms reside in the Active Intellect, Azadpur, in line with his earlier endorsement of conceptualism about sensory content, suggests that the Active Intellect informs the sensory experience with universals as well.

However, the most innovative dimension of Azadpur's analysis can be found in the concluding chapter, in which he brings together several threads from earlier discussions and argues why Avicenna's Active Intellect is a viable alternative to analytic philosophers' appeal to language as the ground of the space of reasons. In this context, Azadpur invokes McDowell, who posits "language" as the repository of accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what. Following Gadamer, McDowell invokes a fusion of linguistic horizons when participating in the dialogue between different linguistic traditions. But Azadpur rightly points out how such an appeal to language and a fusion of linguistic horizons still fails to account for why they come to ground the space of reasons. Moreover, medieval philosophers such as Avicenna do not discount one's initiation into a linguistic tradition in order to orient oneself in the space of reasons, as is evident through their discussion of the relation between natural languages and logic. But the question remains as to how to explain the unique status of the logical space of reasons without reducing it to naturalism, especially since the appeal to linguistic traditions or their fusion reifies "language" and almost makes it a *self-conscious,* superstructure underlying everything. In short, language achieves the status of an ultimate reality and becomes the supreme, all-founding being.

Azadpur contends that the Avicennian account of the Active Intellect, which, by definition, is a self-conscious agent, is well-suited to address these concerns. Avicenna is able to sustain his account of the isomorphism between what we experience and what reality truly is, because of the identity relation between the Active Intellect and the Giver of forms. Anticipating a skeptical response to Avicenna's use of religious locution, Azadpur hastens to add that McDowell's own characterization of Plato justifies such religious usage. He concludes by asserting that the subtleties of Avicenna's epistemology "provide us with further perennialist resources to resist, with McDowell, the excessive philosophical obsessions of modernity with the successes of natural sciences" (p. 114).

One more thing that Azadpur could have mentioned in relation to his critical take on analytic epistemology is the existence-based epistemology that developed in later Islamic philosophy, particularly at the hands of Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640). From Ṣadrā's standpoint, all of these discussions are still haunted by the ghost of epistemic subjectivism that sees reality in terms of discrete, atomistic units, with human beings given an undue, privileged onto-epistemic status. In Ṣadrā's onto-epistemology, reality is no longer an aggregate of discrete entities and a collection of independent objects set against the knowing subject that presides over them. It is rather the interconnectedness of beings, set against a gradational plane of existence, that simultaneously discloses an aspect of being (*wujūd*) and determines the process of knowing. In this picture, one already encounters the world as laden with meanings and relations at the level of sense experience.[4]

Be that as it may, there is little doubt that Azadpur's *Analytic Philosophy and Avicenna* is a first-rate exposition of the contemporary relevance of Avicenna's epistemology. Some might object to its heavy use of analytic terms, such as "conceptual scheme," "logical space of reasons," "cognitive order," "relational and non-relational intentionality," "non-inferential factual knowledge," and the like while expounding Avicennian epistemology. Even so, the author does an excellent job of contextualizing Avicennian vocabulary, while taking care to preserve its philological integrity. However, I do find some tension between the author's initial position, which states that our initiation into a linguistic tradition is what allows us to gain conceptual powers extending all the way to sense experience (pp. 30–31), and the Avicennian view that places its premium on the intellect and its self-actualization, through the mediation of the Active Intellect, which the author favors in the end (pp. 113–114). In addition, the author neglects to explain the intricacies of the crucial concept of the natural universal (*kullī ṭabīʿī*) when discussing various modalities of universals (pp. 91–92).[5]

These minor, critical remarks should not, however, diminish the value of Azadpur's excellent presentation of the Avicennian perspective with respect to contemporary analytic epistemology. The book marks a significant contribution

to the relevance of the study of Islamic philosophy, and it will be of benefit to students, scholars, and philosophers interested in non-Western philosophy, Avicenna studies, medieval epistemology, Islamic studies, cross-cultural philosophy, and Islamic humanities.

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Endnotes

1. Robert Pasnau, *After Certainty: A History of Our Epistemic Ideals and Illusions* (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).
2. Lloyd P. Gerson, *Platonism and Naturalism: The Possibility of Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).
3. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
4. For an excellent analysis of Mullā Ṣadrā's epistemology, see Ibrahim Kalin, *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy: Mullā Ṣadrā on Existence, Intellect, and Intuition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
5. The term "natural universal" refers to the common nature (*al-ṭabīʿa al-mushtaraka*) that is shared by individuals falling under a particular universal term such as man. Although the epithet "universal" is being used with it, it is, strictly speaking, nothing other than being as such (*bimā huwa huwa*). That is to say, in itself it is dissociated from the notion of universality or particularity, unity or multiplicity, and so on. Since it is unconditioned by anything (*lā bi-sharṭ*), it can exist simultaneously with its particular instances. The term "natural" in the expression "natural universal" refers to the nature, essence, or quiddity of the thing being considered.

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