

Knowledge by Presence: A History

It is clear that philosophy, if it is to establish the integrity and systematic unity of human reason, is obligated to coalesce all forms and manifestations of awareness and subject them to the overriding power of the judgment of human intellectual consciousness. In attempting to accomplish this feat, modern Western philosophy has, since its inception, been compelled to exclude certain claims of awareness from the domain of human knowledge, and to brand them as mere expressions of fervor or as leaps of imagination. This was done lest the flow of philosophical logic be disrupted and force the disintegration of primary awareness. For instance, given that mystical experiences are characterized by a noetic quality in the sense that they make a certain claim of awareness of the world of reality, philosophical inquiry is compelled to ascertain the truth or falsehood of these experiences as a possible alternate dimension of the human intellect. While the same can be said concerning the problem of self-consciousness, the problem of our knowledge of our sensations and feelings, and our knowledge of our faculties of apprehension, and our knowledge of our bodies, theoretical reason is beckoned to examine their place in the comprehensive philosophical account of human consciousness. More often than not, modern philosophy has disparaged the inclusion of these species of knowledge into the corpus of its thinking for the sake of maintaining its uniform understanding of awareness. Yet, the exclusion by philosophical thought of these matters does not, *ipso facto*, prove the falsehood of these types of knowledge.

In fact, this study will make clear that these forms of knowledge do submit themselves to philosophical inquiry, and that, far from being anomalies to logical thinking, they stand to further the search for the nature of being. Examination of the history of the concept of knowledge by presence will both attest to this truism and serve as a prelude to the examination of its inner logic and its implications for philosophy. The notion of knowledge by presence not only possesses a historical legacy but has itself acted as the agent of history in bringing about the separation of Islamic and Western philosophies, both of which had emerged from the bosom of the Hellenic philosophical tradition. The reason as to why Islamic philosophy was given to the primacy of such a primordial mode of knowledge, which has thus far evaded the Western analytical tradition, is itself a question of great interest and importance. A possible clue may lie in the manner in which the Islamic and the Western philosophical traditions understood Greek thought. A cursory review of the formation of Islamic philosophy will be instructive in this regard, and will also shed light on the primary importance that the notion of knowledge by presence holds in Islamic philosophy, and the manner in which early philosophical thinking led to a coherent doctrine of knowledge by presence (*al-'ilm al-ḥudūrī al-ishrāqī*).¹

Since the time of Plato and Aristotle the mainstream epistemological tradition has been divided on the most fundamental problem of human intellectual knowledge, precipitating diametrically different strands:

First, there is the Platonic view in which intellectual knowledge is an intellectual reflection by the human mind on unique, simple, universal, immutable, and immaterial objects. In this view intellectual knowledge is, in fact, an intellectual *vision* of these “transcendent” objects.² The Forms, as intelligible objects of our transcendental knowledge, have a real and metaphysical existence, and are things or beings in and of themselves, independent of the process of the human mind and of the sensible physical objects that exist in the world of “becoming.” On the basis of the dualism inherent in ‘being’ and ‘becoming’, Plato developed his notion of a “true reality” as the field of objective reference for our intellectual knowledge. This true reality is characterized by the power of being the source of knowledge in our minds and also by constituting the reality of things in themselves, or as they really are.³ In contrast to this, Plato described a “symbolic reality” as the field of “belief,” which is, as F. M. Cornford has stated, placed by Plato himself “between reality and non-reality,” such that, “one cannot form any stable conception either as being or not being, or as both

being and not being, or as neither.”⁴ As a matter of fact, Plato’s theory of knowledge may be seen as a pattern of “intellectual perception” instead of “intellectual theoretical abstract conceptualization.”

Plato explains what this intellectual perception would amount to:

The ascent to “see” the thing in the upper world you may take as standing for the upward journey of the soul into the region of the intelligible; then you will be in possession of what I surmise, since that is what you wish to be told. Heaven knows whether it is true; but this, at any rate is how it appears to me. In the world of knowledge, the last thing to be ‘perceived’ and only with great difficulty is the essential Form of Goodness. Once it is ‘perceived’, the conclusion must follow that, for all things, this is the cause of whatever is right and good; in the visible world it gives birth to light and to the lord of light while it is itself sovereign in the intellect and in truth. Without having had a ‘vision’ of this Form no one can act with wisdom, either in his own life or in matters pertaining to the state.⁵

Secondly, there is an antithetic view to this Platonic way of thinking. This view, as Aristotle argues, asserts the fact that there is no identification of “seeing” and “knowing,”⁶ since knowing is never seeing if there is no intelligible object to be seen. Thus the central issue for Aristotle was: What is knowing, if it is more than seeing, and if there are no antecedent objects in the objective world to be seen such as the Platonic Forms?

If one agrees with Aristotle that Plato’s “Ideas” do not exist, and that the consequent “intellectual vision” of these antecedent Ideas is not what really constitutes the essence of human intellectual knowledge, one is faced with the problem: What then are the true objects of human intellectual knowledge? If for instance, the pure reality of a triangle does not exist in the world of real being, and our intellectual knowledge of triangle *qua* triangle is not obtained by an intellectual perception of the pure reality of a triangle, then how can one have an intellectual knowledge of a triangle at all? Since the pure reality of a triangle does not exist among sensible objects, the Aristotelian conception confronts a problem. It is with a view to addressing this problem that Aristotle presents his renowned analysis of intellectual knowledge in these words:

Knowledge and sensation are divided to correspond with the realities, potential knowledge and sensation answering to potentialities, actual knowledge and sensation to actualities. Within the soul the faculties of knowledge and sensation are potentially these objects, the one that which is knowable, the other that which is sensible. They must be either the things themselves or their forms. The former al-

ternative is of course impossible: it is not the stone which is present in the soul but its form. It follows that the soul is analogous to the hand; for as the hand is a tool of tools, so the mind is the form of forms and sense the form of sensible things.

Since according to common argument there is nothing outside and separate in existence from sensible spatial magnitudes, the objects of thought are in the sensible forms *viz.*, both the abstract objects and all states and affections of sensible things. Hence (1) no one can learn or understand anything in the absence of sense, and (2) when the mind is actively aware of anything, it is necessarily aware of it along with an image; for images are like sensuous contents except in that they contain no matter.⁷

Succinctly put, since Aristotle evidently denies the existence of any intelligible objects outside of human nature and separate from sensible spatiotemporal magnitudes, he did not agree with Plato that intellectual knowledge is, in fact, the intellectual perception of those separate objects. Therefore, when there is no objective reference for an intellectual vision to be found, that vision proves to be a figment of the imagination. The conclusion is that the true objects of thought exist in sensible forms and are intellectualized through "abstraction."

The discrepancy between these two approaches has, since the beginning of the history of philosophy, led to the examination of the problem of knowledge through the two divergent approaches, those of Plato and Aristotle. Over the course of the unfolding of the Western philosophical tradition, this division became so distinctive, overriding the ultimate unity of objective of the two schools, that many modern philosophers have concluded that the Platonic and the Aristotelian philosophies are absolutely antithetical in nature, and therefore any attempts aimed at bringing them into systematic unity would be in vain. In the face of this great philosophical division, the epistemological problem concerning human intellectual or transcendent knowledge remained unresolved. Therefore, while both the Platonic and the Aristotelian philosophical traditions have sought to arrive at intellectual knowledge as distinct from sensory empirical awareness, their disagreement over the path adopted—either as the intellectual "vision" of intelligibles or the architectonic "abstraction" of our sense-experience—has obfuscated the search for the fundamental preepistemic foundation for human transcendent knowledge.

From the very beginning of its history, there has existed in Islamic philosophy a unanimous concern for establishing a common ground between Plato and Aristotle on the matter of human knowledge. In principle, the Islamic approach shows that the two ostensibly contra-

dictory systems of epistemology, the Platonic and the Aristotelian, can be employed in a simple philosophical framework for the purpose of arriving at a satisfactory solution to the problem of human knowledge. In this regard, Islamic philosophy maintains that the mind is constituted by its nature to function in different ways at the same time; being perceptive of intelligible substances on the one hand, and speculative about sensible objects on the other. Yet, Islamic philosophy extends beyond attempts at a resolution of the differences between Plato and Aristotle, and points to their analytical shortcomings. Islamic philosophy is of the belief that, just as the Aristotelian analysis of "abstraction," though not to be refuted, does not account for a final and satisfactory resolution of the problem of intellectual knowledge, Plato's theory of intellectual "perception" cannot be regarded as the complete treatment of that problem either. Islamic philosophy, while based on the fusion of the Platonic and the Aristotelian approaches, ultimately extends beyond the confines of the two, asserting that both Plato's and Aristotle's views can be reestablished on a primordial sense of knowledge, the meaning of which is to be so fundamental and so radical that all forms and degrees of human knowledge can be reduced to it. There is some conception of this primordial sense of consciousness in the simplicity with which all applications of the word knowledge meet, like lines converging upon a common center. In other words, there must be an ontological foundation for both 'abstraction' and intellectual 'vision' so that all varieties of human awareness can flow from it.

Of course, we must admit that this method of philosophy was pioneered by "pagan" Neoplatonists starting with Plotinus and ending with Proclus in the West. They originated the notions of "emanation," "apprehension by presence," and "illumination," all of which served as steps toward Islamic philosophy's view of the ultimate ontological foundation of all knowledge. The Neoplatonists undoubtedly contributed significantly to the resolution of important problems in philosophy, and especially provided new insights into the problem of mystical knowledge and the apprehension of the One and Unity. Without this significant precedent, it would be hard to conceive that Islamic philosophy would have later been able to successfully systematize its approach.

In the philosophy of Dionysius, in particular, there exists a treatment of certain advanced principles of illumination that can facilitate the constitution of a philosophical system. Therefore, while it was Muslim thinkers who engaged in the systematization of the precepts of their predecessors, the principles of illumination utilized by them

in their formulations—such as those based on the idea of emanation and the theory of knowledge by presence—were initiated and developed exclusively by the Neoplatonists. However, the Neoplatonists were not, in general, concerned with the basic question posited here, namely, whether or not there are existential grounds for all modes of human apprehension and epistemology, that is, grounds for all modes of human knowledge. Is there common ground for the Platonic intellectual vision, Aristotelian abstract knowledge, knowledge of the self, sensory knowledge, and mystical knowledge? This earlier school of philosophy did not explicitly identify the primordial mode of knowledge with the very existential states of the reality of the self, although when encountering the problem of mysticism it touched the ground and spoke of a kind of knowledge by presence, as opposed to ordinary knowledge pertaining to the subject-object relation. Moreover, Neoplatonism did not characterize its understanding of knowledge by presence through the actual existential truth of mystical consciousness of the One that can occur in the human mind as an instantiation of knowledge by presence.⁸ But in Islamic illuminative philosophy all these steps are manifestly present, making clear what is meant by knowledge by presence. Yet, the full understanding of knowledge by presence was predicated upon the historical unfolding of Islamic philosophy. The elaboration of the mainstream of the Islamic interpretation of Hellenic and Hellenistic philosophy eventually leads to the emergence of the illuminative system in Islamic philosophy, based on the logical truth of knowledge by presence. The very vicissitudes of this historical process itself provides an important insight into the examination of the concept of knowledge by presence.

AL-FĀRĀBĪ'S THEORY OF DIVINE FORMS AND GOD'S KNOWLEDGE

Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (ca. 870–950) is known as the Second Master and the greatest authority after Aristotle. His fame comes from having introduced the doctrine of the “Harmonization of the opinions of Plato and Aristotle,” and he began his discourse with Plato’s ideas concerning the necessity of placing such a harmonization at the very foundation of philosophy. Al-Fārābī believed that Aristotle had categorically rejected the existence of the Platonic Ideas, but that when Aristotle had reached the problem of theology and the notion of a “first cause” of the universe, he found himself faced with the difficult problem of the Divine Forms, the existence of which must be, beyond

any doubt, presupposed in the Supreme Mind of the First Being. This kind of existence, of course, is characterized by all those descriptions given of the real being of Forms by Plato. Having understood Aristotle's predicament, al-Fārābī, in one of his famous tracts, described the manner in which the Aristotelian notion of "efficient cause" necessarily leads to the divine existence of Forms. He began his discourse by stipulating the principle of the "applicability" of all the univocal words such as "existence," "essence," or "living," to the Divine Reality. Al-Fārābī pointed out that the univocality of the meaning of these expressions can be preserved by considering variations in degrees of their meanings, rather than requiring uniformity or otherwise similarity in the observable references of these expressions. The fluctuation of exactness and "nobility" of a principle does not violate the essential unity of that principle. Thus, al-Fārābī concludes that existence, essence, living, or knowing can be equally applied to God as to other-than-God in the same sense, although they are true of God in the highest and noblest degree of the same sense, and of other-than-God in a lower one.

On the basis of this linguistic theory, al-Fārābī proceeded to explicate the central theses of his philosophy of the divine existence of the Forms in these words:

Thus, we say, since God has been proved to be the living "cause" for the existence of this universe with all varieties of beings in it, it is therefore necessary for Him to hold in His Essence all those "Forms" that He is supposed to bring into the world of existence. If there were not in the essence of God these Forms as the patterns of existing things, then what would be the preexistence design of those which He brought into *real* existence? And in what order has He given effect to what He has brought into being?⁹

Concerning the problem of knowledge, al-Fārābī describes his opinion in the following manner:

A Ring (*faṣṣ*)—The human soul is that which is capable of conceiving a meaning by definition and by understanding the pure reality of that meaning from which all extraneous accessories are shaken off and the sheer reality of it has remained as the common core, to the simplicity of which all variation of instances is reduced. This simplification has been made by a power commonly known as the "theoretical reason" (*al'aql al-nazarī*). This state of the soul is analogous to a mirror, and the theoretical reason is the power of the transparency of that mirror, and the intelligibles appearing in that mirror are reflections from the realities existing in the divine world; like the features of corporeal objects that reflect on the transparent surface of a

mirror. This will be so if the soul's transparency has not been corrupted by nature or it has not happened that in the upward relationship of the soul that transparency has become blurred by some downward preoccupations such as passion and wrath.¹⁰

It must be stated at this juncture that al-Fārābī's theses on Plato's Ideas and the problem of human knowledge have been the subject of renowned criticisms throughout history, and especially by modern historians. Muhsin Mahdi, a characteristic critic of medieval Muslim philosophers in general and al-Fārābī in particular, writes,

In many instances his (al-Fārābī's) conclusions depend upon one's accepting as genuine some documents of questionable authenticity, notably the extracts from *The Enneads* of Plotinus that gained currency in Islamic thought as *The Theology of Aristotle*.¹¹

While the criticism is valid in principle, it does not hold in connection with the Forms and the intellectual vision of intelligibles. This is mainly because al-Fārābī's first argument concerning the problem of the Divine Ideas is based on the typical Aristotelian notion of the "first efficient cause."¹² However, this is not a reliance upon, or reference to, some extracts from Plotinus' *Enneads* as well as other sources. The fact that al-Fārābī made reference to the "Aristotelian theology" in this argument meant no more than a reference to the Aristotelian theological philosophy of the first efficient cause. It did not imply, at least in this particular place, that al-Fārābī's reference was made to the book of doubtful authorship called *The Theology of Aristotle*.

It is apparent that the cited historian's criticism of Islamic medieval philosophy is based on a confusion of the "use and mention distinction." Very often when Islamic philosophy used *The Theology of Aristotle*, it did not explicitly mention the "Book of Theology," but merely referred to the theological dimension of Aristotelian philosophy.

There are many other places in the works of Aristotle from which one can easily infer that in his philosophy there is an outstandingly theological dimension that allows one to call it the "theology of Aristotle." It was from the Aristotelian doctrine of efficient cause that Avicenna developed his renowned analysis of "emanation." It was out of the Aristotelian "final cause" and "ultimate perfection" in the *Ethics*¹³ that Averroes and St. Thomas¹⁴ developed the theory of "beatitude" and "ultimate felicity." Moreover, the famed Aristotelian notion of the "unmoved mover" served as a theological proposition in physics. All this accounts for the "theology of Aristotle" from which these medieval philosophers, both in the East and in the West, drew their ideas

about the foundation of the universe and the problem of human knowledge.

It would seem that the philosophy of al-Fārābī, on the whole, attempts to propound these major themes. A systematic philosophy such as Aristotle's cannot confine itself to the limited scope of some particular philosophical problems related to physical objects and yet ignore others. Rather, the nature of the real and unchangeable being of the "intelligibles" in relation to the existence of sensible objects was considered in a logical unity in such a manner that any account of the truth of the one is consistent with the possibility of the truth of the other. Therefore, the order of 'knowledge', like the order of 'being', was described in a unity of causal connection such that just as a set of contingent consequent events implied a necessary antecedent of being, a contingent piece of human knowledge also presupposed a necessary antecedent intelligence behind it. All ostensible human intellectual acts and abstractions could not have more than a receptive part or preparatory role in the act of emanation by the Divine Forms on the transparent tablet of our potential intellect. Yet, such an intellectual act of emanation can possess no meaning except in terms of our prospective theory of knowledge by presence. We shall indicate that Aristotle has, though not explicitly, committed himself to the logical consequences of such an idea, and treated at least some of his metaphysical problems in the light of such an integral unity. The task of an interpreter such as al-Fārābī, however, is to understand the whole comprehensive structure of Aristotelian thought by himself, and to let the philosopher be understood by others regarding the manner of the completeness and consistency of his philosophy.

AVICENNA'S THEORY OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

After al-Fārābī, his interesting philosophical thesis resonated in the thinking of other well-known Muslim philosophers who followed in his footsteps, introducing theories of human knowledge on the basis of a synthesis of the opinions of Plato and Aristotle. These syntheses were made in accordance with different principles and different degrees of reconciliation between the two traditional Hellenic ways of thinking.

Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 1037), for instance, on account of his renowned analysis of "emanation" (*qā'idat al-wāḥid*),¹⁵ argued that, while the Active Intellect remains itself in the order of separate being—transcendent, immutable, and absolutely incorruptible—it brings

about in the human mind all forms of human knowledge from total potentiality into gradual actuality. In his commentary upon the Quranic "Light Verse" and analysis of the symbolism of this verse, Avicenna declared:

"Parmi ses facultés, il y a ce qui lui appartient en fonction de son besoin de regir le corps, et c'est la faculté à laquelle est attribué particulièrement le nom d'intelligence pratique. C'est celle qui, parmi les choses humaines particulières qui doivent être faites pour arriver aux fins choisies, découvre les premisses indispensables, premiers principes, idées repandues, fruits de l'expérience, ceci avec le secours de l'intelligence speculative, qui fournit l'opinion universelle par laquelle on passe à l'opinion particulière.

"Parmi les facultés de l'âme, il y a aussi ce qu'elle possède pour autant qu'elle a besoin de parachever sa substance en (la rendant) intelligence en acte. La première est une faculté qui la prépare à se tourner vers les intelligibles, certains l'appellent intelligence matérielle et elle est la niche. Celle-ci est suivie par une autre faculté qui vient à l'âme lors de la mise en acte en elle des premiers intelligibles. Par cette nouvelle faculté, (l'âme) se dispose à acquérir les seconds; soit par la réflexion, qui est l'olivier, si elle demeure faible, soit par l'intuition intellectuelle, qui est de plus l'huile, si l'intuition est plus forte que la réflexion; elle s'appelle intelligence *habitus* et elle est le verre. Et la faculté noble, murie, est une faculté sainte, 'dont l'huile est presque allumée'.

Un peu plus tard, lui viennent en acte une faculté et une perfection. La perfection consiste en ce que les intelligibles lui sont donnés en acte, en une intuition qui les représente dans l'esprit, et c'est 'lumière sur lumière.' Et la faculté consiste en ceci qu'il lui appartient de réaliser l'intelligible acquis, porte ainsi à son achèvement, comme est l'objet de l'intuition, des qu'elle le veut, sans avoir besoin de l'acquiescer (à ce dernier instant), et c'est la lampe. Cette perfection s'appelle intelligence acquise, et cette faculté s'appelle intelligence en acte. Ce qui la fait passer de l'*habitus* à l'acte parfait, et aussi de l'intelligence matérielle à l'*habitus*, c'est l'Intellect actif. Il est le feu.¹⁶

In this analysis, as is clearly established, the focus of the exegesis is to free the human mind altogether from possession of any kind of initial activity by attributing all intellectual operations to the separate Active Intellect. Avicenna, in quoting the Quranic expression, referred to this separate intellect as the "fire" (*nār*). On this account, all that the human mind can and is designed to do is to prepare itself, through coordination of the powers of perception and apprehension, to receive its own proportionate degree of light from the fire. This proportion varies in degrees, so that the greatest intensity of

light is the overabundant light bestowed upon a soul that enjoys the greatest degree of proximity to the fire; or, as in another Quranic expression in the “Light Verse” used by Avicenna: “light upon light” (*nūr ‘alā nūr*).¹⁷

AL-GHAZZĀLĪ’S TREATISE ON LIGHT

A philosophical interpretation of the aforementioned Quranic verse was, in fact, the critical factor that led the orthodox theological mind of al-Ghazzālī (1058–1111) to the light of mysticism. Under the influence of the rather mystical interpretation of the scriptural text, introduced by Avicenna, al-Ghazzālī developed a systematic approach to Sufism, reflected in his famous work *The Niche of Lights* (*Mishkāt al-anwār*).¹⁸

Although defiant *vis-à-vis* the conclusions of the philosophers who preceded him, and especially critical of Avicenna, in his book, *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, al-Ghazzālī enthusiastically committed himself to the mystical implication of this Avicennian thesis of the “niche of lights.” Based on the Avicennian theory, al-Ghazzālī developed a significant linguistic account of the expression ‘light’ veritably and literally applied to God as the source of lights, and to the existence of the universe as an emanative light, emerging from the Light of Lights.

Al-Ghazzālī’s achievement in the *Incoherence* is for the most part semantic, for he is among the first philosophers, at least in the history of Islamic speculative thought, who distinguished the problem of using a word in its meaning with reference to its applications from the problem of using the word in its meaning without reference to its applications. At the stage of setting a standard meaning, there cannot be any reference to a particular application—empirical or transcendental. Since this is a stage of the registration of the relationship of words and meanings, there is no preference for one particular application of the word over another. It is only in the case of an application that the problem of reference arises.

Concerning the word ‘light’, it is, al-Ghazzālī states, “an expression for that which is by itself visible and makes other things visible, such as the sunlight. This is the definition of, and the reality concerning, light, according to its first signification.”¹⁹ Subsequent to delineating the standard meaning of the expression ‘light’, al-Ghazzālī further explicates that as regards the application of ‘light’ the only unquestionable and indubitable reference for the word is when applied to the One, which is by itself visible, and makes other things visible.

Other applications of 'light', including the physical light of our sight, are incomplete and involve many defects which make them far from being pure applications for the meaning of light. Al-Ghazzālī writes in this regard:

If, then, there be such an Eye as is free from all these physical defects, would not it, I ask, more properly be given the name of light?²⁰

It is clear that in Avicennian epistemology, as well as in the manner in which al-Fārābī deals with epistemological problems, there is no complete submission to the Platonic intellectual vision of the Ideas, nor is there absolute resignation to the Aristotelian theory of abstraction. Instead, as can be seen in al-Ghazzālī's formulations, there is a radical move to answer the question: If epistemology should presuppose, or correspond to, ontology, what might the ontological features of our intelligible universal objects be; and how and where do these universal objects exist? Philosophers often claim to know universal entities that are ostensibly universal, but different from individual physical objects. Should this be the case, a subsequent question can be posed: What is the nature of the being of these entities and how do they relate to our individual consciousness? Briefly put in metaphorical terms, a possible answer to these puzzling questions is that the human mind is like the niche of a light which, due to conjunction with an external transcendent fire, obtains illumination and reflects in itself whatever is given to it, and depending on the degree it can approximate the fire, it becomes closer to the source of light that is intellectual knowledge.

Whether or not this kind of metaphorical language is an adequate solution to the problem of intellectual knowledge is not the point at issue here insofar as we are dealing with the history of knowledge by presence. It must be further added that a metaphorical answer, such as the one discussed above, to such a fundamental question is really an oversimplification and does not do justice to the philosophy of human knowledge. However, the objective of our inquiry at this juncture is to present a well-documented survey of the historical background of the theory of knowledge by presence in Islamic thought. Once the central argument of the inquiry into this mode of knowledge is elucidated, this study will engage in a logical examination of the failure or success of the theory of apprehension in general, and the Islamic approach to a nonphenomenal or preepistemic awareness of the self in particular.

It is clear that both al-Fārābī and Avicenna, though profoundly affiliated with the Hellenic system of thought, have developed their

ideas on the basis of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Yet, the two Muslim philosophers' hypothesis of intellectual knowledge is founded on an emanation from, or unification with, separate entities. These entities are Divine Ideas or Forms that may be already present in the First Cause, according to al-Fārābī's analogy of the "mirror"; and as formal knowledge, they are identical with and present in the separate substance of the "Agent Intellect," in the terminology of Avicenna. Both al-Fārābī and Avicenna tried to impute their own theories to the Hellenic language of their master in philosophy—Aristotle. However, their approaches in this regard were different; one utilized the notion of the First Cause, and the other an interpretation of the Agent Intellect, two concepts which, beyond any doubt, are typically Aristotelian. It has therefore been understood that both of these medieval Muslim philosophers had gained some sense of knowledge by presence, although neither of them ever managed to present a thorough analysis of this fundamental concept.²¹ Clearly, each of their two systems points to a peculiar identity of the knowing subject with the Divine Objects. However, the nature of the identity is open to question; a problem to be discussed only within the framework of our theory of knowledge by presence.

AVERROES'S THEORY OF MAN'S ULTIMATE HAPPINESS

By the time Averroes (Ibn Rushd 1126–98), known to medieval Western philosophy as "the commentator of Aristotle" appeared, this general pattern of epistemology had gained more of an Aristotelian structure than a Platonic one. Both in his commentary on the *De Anima* and in his commentary on the *Metaphysics*, Averroes strongly advocated Aristotle's position concerning the distinction between the Agent Intellect (or Active Intellect) and human intellect. Averroes argued in this regard that the Agent Intellect is not part of the nature of the human intellect; rather, the latter is designed to set out from potency to act through the process of unification with the former as the exogenous source for the actualization of intellectual knowledge. What this unification implies and how the manner in which the nexus between the Agent Intellect—as a completely separate substance—and the human intellect—as a material, spatiotemporal one—can be understood, are questions to which Aristotle, according to Averroes's interpretation, does not address himself. Averroes, however, did seek to answer these questions, but failed to provide satisfactory responses. Instead, he merely resorted to establishing an analogy between

“form-like” and “matter.” Here, Averroes argued that the Agent Intellect, being a type of form, is united with the human possible intellect as its matter, forming what may be termed material intellect. On several occasions, Averroes presents his proposition in an emphatic manner, arguing that the independent Agent Intellect becomes united with the human material intellect making an existential union between form and matter. Averroes’s thesis reflects the Aristotelian treatise on the problem of the “surviving soul” and “man’s ultimate happiness.”

In his long commentary on the *Metaphysics*, Averroes wrote: (*Comment* 17.d.)

We, however, have already examined these two opinions in the book, *De Anima*, and we said that the agent intellect is, as it were, the “form” in the “material intellect.” And that it brings about the intelligibles, and receives them at the same time, inasmuch as it is involved in the material intellect. And that the material intellect is generable and corruptible.²² We have explicated there in the *Book De Anima* that this is the opinion of the philosopher, and that the habitual intellect has a generable part and a corruptible part. That which is corruptible is only its action, but the intellect in its essence which enters into us from the outside is not corruptible. For if it were generable, its emerging would be subject to the law of change and transmutation as considered in the essays of that science, *De Anima*, in the discussion of substance, where it was explained that: if something should emerge without transmutation, then something would come to being out of nothing. And therefore that intellect, which is in potency, is, as it were, the locus for this intellect which is in act, not as a matter for the subsisting form. If, however, the action of this intellect, that is, the Active or Agent Intellect, inasmuch as it is joined with the material intellect, were not generable, then its action would be identical with its substance and it would not have been compelled in this action to join and unite with the material intellect. But since it has in fact joined with and acted upon the material intellect, its action will be considered from the standpoint of something other than its substance being joined with it. And for that reason whatever action it achieves as a separate substance in us, it does not achieve for itself but for other than itself. Thus, it is possible that something eternal understand something generable and corruptible. Then if that intellect becomes free from potency at the time that human perfection reaches its climax, it is necessary that this action, which is considered as other than the substance of the intellect itself, be eliminated from it. And then at this time we are either not to understand this intellect at all, or we understand it such that its action is nothing other than its substance. And since it is impossible to say that

in the state of final possible perfection we lose altogether our understanding of it, it therefore remains to be said that since this intellect becomes absolutely free from potency, we understand it inasmuch as its action, that is our understanding, is nothing but its substance. It is the ultimate felicity.²³

How this analogy works, what its accurate interpretation is, and whether it really answers these questions—all must be understood within the scope of the theory of knowledge by presence and unity by emanation and absorption that will be developed in this study.

It appears that Averroes's argument, in its entirety, indicates how a peculiar relation of the corruptible and unseparate possible intellect to the Agent Intellect which, unlike the possible and habitual intellect, is absolutely incorruptible and wholly separate from human existence, is possible.

Reflection upon this proposition leads us to the consideration of a number of fundamental points, which are most significant for the purposes of this study. These points can be elucidated as follows: First, the Agent Intellect is analogous to a form for the material intellect functioning as its matter. This leads to a kind of unity between the two substances, material and immaterial, though the analogy is not strong enough to confirm such a projected unity. However, in point of fact, the material intellect is related to the Agent Intellect, as a locus or a stage to an unseen agent. Second, the Agent Intellect through its intellectual illumination comes to us from without (*dākhil 'alaynā min al-khārij*); it is not originally a part of the human mind. Third, the highest possible degree of perfection in intellectual knowledge on the terrestrial realm is our understanding of the Agent Intellect; namely, our intellectual communication with intelligible objects, once our intellectual consciousness is no longer mediated by any intellectual contemplation and reflection on the Agent Intellect. Rather, our knowledge is achieved by an existential unification with the very substance of the Agent Intellect. In our interpretation, this unification can only be understood through a form of knowledge by presence which we shall call annihilation or absorption. Fourth, this "existential unitary awareness" is the mystical consciousness, which is not only philosophically possible in terms of knowledge by presence but is also attained through the ultimate felicity of human logical contemplation in this world. Fifth, this argument underlies Aristotle's belief in the survival of the human soul after death; for, if the ultimate unification is to be purely existential with no material potency involved, then no corruption or decomposition of the human body can ever have an im-

pact on such a highly purified unification of the human soul with the Agent Intellect.

The interesting argument that led Averroes to this rather peculiar conclusion—"existentially unitary consciousness"—will be discussed later with a view to addressing the question: How can an individual soul become existentially united with the One or with the divine intelligible natures?

Now, for purposes of reference and analysis we shall summarize the pertinent arguments here: When our intellectual potentiality of contemplation and introspection is exhausted due to the actualization of the highest possible degree of intellectual perfection—a perfect self-realization—it means that there is no longer potentiality in reserve. When there is no "potency" there is no meaning for "act." The empirical operation, as well as the logical application, of the dichotomy of the "act–potency relationship" comes to an end. This is also given by the rule of the opposition of privation and aptitude, as will be demonstrated later. In view of what has been considered here, there is no meaning for "act," such that the notion of knowledge can no longer be accordingly interpreted as an "immanent act" of the human mind. In these circumstances, we should either be left absolutely ignorant, that is, knowing nothing of intelligible objects, or, on the grounds that we are in fact in the perfect condition of our knowing, we should be supposed to know better than ever.

The first supposition is impossible, because it is contrary to the state of intellectual perfection that we have just obtained. It remains therefore to be said that we, in these circumstances, know the intelligible substance. As a result of this knowledge, we know everything in the intelligible world, but not through mediation of the act of perception or conceptualization, and not even through vision and reflection or any kind of intentional representation, but only by unity with, or *presence* in, the reality of that Divine Substance. In fact this argument initiates the discussion of the theory of knowledge by presence and its essential feature of self-objectivity.

At this stage of awareness, it should be pointed out that knowledge is no longer an intentional or transcendental phenomenon of mind, but rather it may be put forward as a kind of self-realization transcending representational knowledge, "reaching" the self-awareness of the reality of the self. This process takes place by virtue of an existential unification and not by an intellectual or phenomenal act of knowing. Other questions as well as a number of objections may be raised to this interpretation from different angles, but we shall consider their implications at a later time.

As has already been illustrated, the common feature in all of the three aforementioned Islamic approaches to the problem of intellectual knowledge is to pass through the Aristotelian sensory intelligence, arriving at a kind of Platonic vision. The preview of their careers extends further to incorporate a sense of knowing, which is essentially identical with the truth value of human personal identity.

Moreover, the principal position of the three philosophers discussed above is that they are all fully convinced that the Agent Intellect is divine and absolutely separate from our spatiotemporal existence and that the relation between such a Divine Being and our existence is established through illumination²⁴ in the sense of intentionally acquired intellectual knowledge, and as a consequence of union by absorption²⁵ in the sense of our self-realization, when the self is in some way united with the Divine Realities. This unity has been expressed through the analogy of a mirror, through the analogy of a niche of light and finally through the transubstantiation of man's material intellect into a Divine Being. This transubstantiation, according to Averroes, takes place through frequent unification of man's material intellect with the action of the separate substance that is illumination or emanation.²⁶

This common feature continued to be the foundation of the whole structure of Islamic philosophy, eventually culminating in the complete system of the illuminative philosophy of Suhrawardī (1155–91) and later to the Islamic “existentialism” of Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī (Mullā Ṣadrā, d. 1640).

It may be added here that Averroes's commitment to the problem of “beatitude” and to unity by emanation and absorption does not contradict his critical stance against the Avicennian thesis of emanation. While in examining the descending order of existence in the world, Averroes categorically condemns this rather Platonistic theory of emanation as entirely non-Aristotelian, in the matter of human knowledge he appeals to an illuminative union of the human intellect with the divine Agent Intellect. This radical change of attitude is mostly due to the fact that the range of the overflowing of the light of existence from the simplicity of the First Cause to the multiplicity of the universe suggests a variation to the ascending process based on man's intellect progressing from the multiplicity of this world to the simplicity of the Divine Radiance.²⁷

Averroes himself sheds light on his thinking. His explication is particularly instructive regarding the fact that despite his position on the problem of divine causality, he chose to reestablish the problem of human knowledge on the basis of the principle of the “illuminative”

relation between human knowledge and the separate Agent Intellect. In his long commentary on the *Metaphysics*, Averroes writes:

The reason that Aristotle has taken this move to bring forward the Agent Intellect separated from matter as the cause, not for all, but for the occurrence of our intellectual powers is the fact that in his opinion these intellectual powers are unrelated to matter. For that matter, it becomes obviously necessary that that which is not in some way associated with matter must come into existence from an absolutely separate and immaterial cause, in just the same way that those material objects must be generated from their material causes.²⁸

This passage gives a clear account of Averroes's commitment to an instantiation of emanation that ultimately has been denoted by illuminative Muslim philosophers as knowledge by presence. From this passage, as well as from many other instances in the words of Averroes, it can be inferred that in principle, Averroes distinguished between divine causality and causation in the material realm. The final conclusion of Averroes in this regard is reflected in the statement that the cause for immaterial objects must be absolutely divine and immaterial—through emanation, while the causes for material things ought to be material ones—and by generation and corruption.

THE ELEMENT OF 'IRFĀN IN THE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE BY PRESENCE

A fundamental factor in the plausibility and wide popularity of illuminative philosophy is the linguistic science of mystical apprehension (*'irfān*).²⁹ This science was pioneered and developed by Ibn al-'Arabī (1165–1240). As this study will show, *'irfān* is to be understood as the linguistic science of mystical apprehension, and the expression of mystical ways of experience both in the introvertive journey of ascent and the extrovertive process of descent. Attempts have been made to identify the science of *'irfān* as an independent science distinct from philosophy, theology, and religion. The great achievement of Ibn al-'Arabī in this new well-organized science was his famous doctrine of the absolute "oneness of existence"³⁰ (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). This doctrine is based upon the proposition that the whole reality of existence and that which really exists (*al-wujūd wa al-mawjūd*) are absolutely one and the same, and that all the multitude in the world of reality, whether they be sensory or intellectual, are merely "illusory": playing in our minds as the second image of an object plays in the eyes of a squint-eyed person. It is the opinion of this study that Ibn al-'Ar-

abī's doctrine of the oneness of existence is neither pantheistic nor monotheistic, as interpreted by almost all scholars. Rather, this doctrine should be understood as *monorealistic*, adhering to the invariability and the strict sense of the unicity and oneness of the world of reality.³¹ Through variegated types of mystical experiences by means of his invented device of a linguistic science called *'irfān*, Ibn al-'Arabī attempted to present the mystical truth of the doctrine of the oneness of existence and to outline its principles, problems, and consequences. Ibn al-'Arabī's successful explications of the fundamentals of this doctrine not only greatly influenced philosophical and theological circles but, in addition, brought forth an alternative pattern of life for the social and political structure of Muslim communities.

Later on this mystical version of the ontology of the world of reality also influenced profoundly the philosophical principles of the Islamic philosophy of existence (existentialism), although there is undoubtedly a great difference between such a purely mystical monorealistic view and the philosophical approach to the characteristic "unity-in-difference" and "difference-in-unity" of the notion of existence proposed by Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī.

To return to the topic of the historical background of illuminative knowledge, reflection upon the early interpretations of the Aristotelian ideas of the Agent Intellect and the efficient cause, as well as those of mystical considerations, seems to suffice in leading to the conclusion with which this study is concerned. For the growing importance of illuminative knowledge was due to the common involvement of these aforementioned philosophers in approaching the problem of human intelligence in connection with divine intelligence.

On the basis of this system of philosophy of knowledge, it is not a mere arbitrary judgment on the part of theoretical reason to prove or disprove the hypothesis of mysticism and the truth or falsity of its paradoxical statements, but it is entirely reasonable to undertake an analytical approach to the problem of mysticism. Moreover, it is not philosophically unwarranted to deal with the question of the self and personal identity, as well as with the most private relation of the self to its sensation, its faculties of apprehension, and its body. All this is logically available in principle through knowledge by presence.

THE ILLUMINATIVE ACCOUNT OF KNOWLEDGE BY PRESENCE

While Averroes was driven ultimately toward a kind of knowledge by existential unification with the divine separate substances, he

did not succeed in giving a complete account of the theory of knowledge by presence. A philosophical account of “presential knowledge” (*al-‘ilm al-huḍūrī*) appeared for the first time in the history of the Islamic tradition in illuminative philosophy, the chief exponent of which was Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (Shaykh al-Ishrāq) (1155–91). Also important in this regard was Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 1274), whose great achievement concerning knowledge by presence centers upon the problem of God’s knowledge of Himself and His knowledge of the universe. In his commentary on Avicenna’s emanationism, Ṭūsī’s main concern was to account for the question: How does God as the Necessary Being, who is also necessary in His act and His knowledge, know His emanation? Suhrawardī believed that one cannot make any inquiry into the knowledge of others who are beyond the reality of one’s own self before getting deeply into the knowledge of one’s selfhood which is nothing other than knowledge by presence.

In his dream of Aristotle, Suhrawardī’s opening remark was his complaint about the great difficulty that had been puzzling him for a long time concerning the problem of human knowledge. The only solution that Aristotle taught him in this mystical trance was: “Think of yourself before thinking of anything else. If you do so, you will then find that the very selfhood of yourself helps you solve your problem.”³² However, Suhrawardī’s illuminative philosophy was based entirely upon the dimension of human knowledge that is identical with the very ontological status of being human. He furnished the foundation of our intellectual consciousness as well as our sensory experience with a profound philosophical analysis of “knowledge by presence.” The word “presence” or “awareness-by-presence” appeared, with great frequency, in the works of Plotinus, and, for that matter, in other Neoplatonic philosophical expositions. Why this form of awareness should have a seat in the very reality of an individual self in the first place is, however, a question that was not explicitly probed in the Neoplatonic philosophical corpus.

The primary question with which Suhrawardī began his inquiry was: What is the objective reference of ‘I’ when used in an ordinary statement like “I think so-and-so,” or “I do this-and-that?” Suhrawardī’s doctrine of knowledge by presence was marked by the intrinsic characteristic of “self objectivity,” whether in mysticism or in other manifestations of this knowledge. For the essential nature of this knowledge is that the reality of awareness and that of which the self is aware are existentially one and the same. Taking the hypothesis of self-awareness as an example, he posited that the self must be absolutely aware of itself without the interposition of a representation. Any representation of the self, empirical or transcendental, must nec-

essarily render the hypothesis of self-awareness contradictory. It is, rather, by the very presence of the very reality of the self that the self is aware of itself in absolute terms. Consequently, the self and awareness of the self are individually and numerically a simple single entity. This train of thinking arrived directly, and inevitably, at the very notion of the self-objectivity of knowledge by presence. Self-objectivity, however, is the chief characteristic of the theory of knowledge by presence discussed in this study, to be distinguished from any other species of human knowledge.³³

THE ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY OF EXISTENCE (EXISTENTIALISM)

Long after Suhrawardī, the history of this philosophical tradition, proceeding in the same direction, gave rise to another achievement that was as fundamental as the previous one. This was the rise of an Islamic type of “existentialist” philosophy, formally called *aṣḥālat al-wujūd*. The founder of this school of philosophy was Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī (Mullā Ṣadrā), who called his methodology of thinking “metaphilosophy” (*al-hikmat al-muta‘āliyah*).³⁴

The basic nature of the metaphilosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā was that it provided a metalinguistic method in philosophy by the use of which independent decisions on the validity and soundness of all philosophical issues and logical questions—be they Platonic, Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, mystical, or religious—may be made. The process of decision making can be implemented without becoming involved in the particularities of each of these systems. Mullā Ṣadrā’s first attempt was to give a primordial, immediate, and univocal meaning to the word “existence.”³⁵ By this he meant to assert that the concept of existence can absorb and accommodate in itself all forms and degrees of reality in general, and overcome the Platonic distinction between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ in particular. Accordingly, the word existence is equivalent to the word “reality,” and is applied to the existence of God with the same univocal meaning as when applied to the existence of any phenomenal object. In Mullā Ṣadrā’s opinion there was no good reason for separating the order of being from the order of intelligence, or from any kind of knowing. In brief, anything that comes out of absolute nothingness into a degree of realization—no matter how weak it may be, or which *is*, from eternity, in the world of reality, is truly to be considered as an existence. Existence, therefore, is absolutely immediate and a most applicable concept.³⁶

This univocity of existence in the philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā is

what makes up the innermost feature of that concept. On the outermost of the same concept, there is nothing but gradation and variation of the same sense of univocity for the sufficient reason that this outermost variation belongs to the very innermost univocity; it does not therefore jeopardize the univocal application of existence. In this sense existence is true of appearances as well as realities and "unseen" entities or separate substances, should they, in themselves, really exist. The light of this existence is so luminous and so radiant that it sheds light on everything, even on its own denial and negation. To cite an example, when someone in his imagination is thinking of "nothingness" as a mental entity, this phenomenon of nothingness is a true instantiation of the most comprehensive concept of existence. The phenomenon of nothingness is thus a form of existence belonging to the world of reality.³⁷

What has been discussed thus far constitutes the matter of the historical background of the theory of knowledge by presence, and its immediate consequences, such as self-objectivity. The aim of this historical presentation has been to show that there is no contradiction when we arrive at the basic ontological reality of awareness, where the existential truth of the knower and his "unitary consciousness," and the thing known, are united. This existential truth, which will be discussed fully later on, may be considered as the objective reference of this particular type of awareness, as well as awareness itself. Also, this historical survey confirms the fact that it is not only the philosophy of mysticism that leads us to the logic of self-objectivity, but that the very nature of the philosophy of the self as well as any approach to the metaphysical theory of human knowledge will also lead us to the position where we must ask the question: How can a form of knowledge by presence be a necessity in philosophy, and how does its self-objectivity underlie all our phenomenal knowledge? Therefore, the concept of the self-objectivity of presential knowledge must be made subject to exacting consideration and systematic analysis.