

Islamic Philosophy and Meaning

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Abstract

The philosophical theories of meaning in Islam are the essential foundations in light of which other fundamental Islamic philosophical theories were developed. The fact that Muslim philosophers disagreed on the right analysis of meaning led them to disagree on other important philosophical topics. In this sense, the diverse Islamic theories of meaning strongly participated in forming different Islamic philosophical paradigms with respect to the accurate interpretation of Islam, the role of reason, and the creation of the universe. Similarly, the Islamic theories of language played a pivotal role in the formation of Islamic theology.

The Quran and the Theories of Language

There are at least two dominant and competing Islamic theological schools: the Mutazilites and the Asharites. And they disagreed on almost everything. The Mutazilites held that language is a set of letters and voices. Therefore, according to them, the language of the Quran (i.e. the holy book of the Muslims) is a series of letters and voices. But letters and voices are material entities which are created at specific periods of time, as all material entities are supposed to be. It follows from their account that the language of the Quran is created at a specific period of time. And hence, the Quran is not eternal. All of this shows that the Mutazilites' theory of language led them to accept the theological view that the Quran is not eternal. In addition, their analysis of language also inclined them toward endorsing non-literal interpretations of the Quran. Since language, according to the Mutazilites, is a set of letters and voices rather than a set of meanings, it follows that the language of the Quran could gain its definite meanings only through our intervention, i.e. only through our interpretation, which is supposed to fix the meanings of the language of the Quran. But the Quran could be interpreted philosophically and not only literally. This paved the way for the Mutazilites' tendency to endorse non-literal interpretations of the Quran, which are usually based on philosophical reasoning. All of this shows the centrality of one's theory of language with respect to one's theological position.

The Asharites, on the other hand, maintained that language is a set of meanings residing in the mind of its composer and / or user. Hence, the language of the Quran is a set of meanings existing in the mind of God, given that the Quran is revealed by God from the point of view of the Muslims. But God is eternal. Therefore, the Quran is eternal. And this is exactly what the Asharites believe in. This indicates that the Asharites' theory of language led them to believe that the Quran is eternal. And thus, their analysis of language, in terms of meanings, is the essential foundation in light of which they endorsed the theological theory that the Quran is eternal. And given that, from the perspective of the Asharites, the language of the Quran is a set of meanings in the mind of God, it follows that the meanings of the Quran are fixed by God Himself. Hence, there is no need to fix the meanings of the Quran through human intervention or interpretation. This paved the way for the Asharites' tendency to endorse the literal interpretation of the Quran, contrary to the position held by the Mutazilites. All of this reveals that these fundamental disagreements between the Mutazilites and the Asharites are in fact based on their disagreement on how to philosophically analyze language.

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Meaning and the Interpretation of Islam

According to the Muslim philosopher Ibn Sina (also known in the West as Avicenna), meaning is that which is conceivable by reason. This implies that Ibn Sina analyzed meaning in terms of reason, and held that meaning is determined by reason. Now, since, from the viewpoint of Ibn Sina, meaning is determined by reason, it follows that, from his perspective, the meanings of the verses of the Quran are determined by reason. But we can successfully reason about the Quran philosophically. Therefore, the philosophical interpretation of the Quran is a plausible interpretation. This shows that, from Ibn Sina's theory of meaning, it follows that the philosophical interpretation of the Quran is an accurate interpretation. Yet any philosophical interpretation of the Quran is a non-literal interpretation. This, in turn, shows that Ibn Sina's theory of meaning led him to endorse a non-literal interpretation of Islam. For example, he held that heaven is a psychological state where good people will live in eternal happiness, while hell is another psychological state where bad people will suffer from eternal depression. On the other hand, the Muslim theologian and philosopher Ibn Taymiyyah analyzed meaning in terms of context. He claimed that meaning is determined by context. It follows from his account of meaning that the meaning of any verse in the Quran is determined by the whole context of the Quran, such as the other verses of the Quran itself and the surrounding circumstances in which the Quranic verses were revealed. And thus, from Ibn Taymiyyah's viewpoint, it is wrong to interpret the Quran philosophically. Hence, the literal interpretation of the Quran is the accurate interpretation. This shows that Ibn Taymiyyah's analysis of meaning led him to accept a literal interpretation of Islam. For instance, from his perspective, heaven is an actual material place where the bodies of good people will be resurrected and enjoy their eternal material lives, while hell is another material place where the bodies of bad people will suffer in an actual fire, exactly as the Quran describes both heaven and hell.

All of this shows the centrality of the theory of meaning with regard to the acceptance or rejection of the literal interpretation of Islam. The fact that Ibn Sina and Ibn Taymiyyah endorsed different theories of meaning led them to accept different interpretations of Islam. Ibn Sina's analysis of meaning in terms of reason forced him to accept a non-literal interpretation of Islam, while Ibn Taymiyyah's analysis of meaning in terms of context forced him to endorse a literal interpretation of Islam. Thus, the conflict between Ibn Sina's philosophy and Ibn Taymiyyah's philosophy is based on their disagreement on how to define meaning. One's theory of meaning determines one's position on the appropriate and genuine method of understanding texts, including religious texts. This is why it is natural that the disagreement over meaning is in fact the essential cause behind the disagreement on the interpretation of religion.

Meaning and Reason

According to the Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd (also known in the West as Averroes), genuine meanings are determined by reason contrary to the position of Ibn Taymiyyah, who claimed that context determines the genuine meanings of words and propositions. Now, knowing that something is true is equivalent to knowing its genuine meaning, which is supposed to refer to what is true in reality. Thus, knowledge depends on genuine meaning. And since Ibn Rushd maintained that reason determines the genuine meanings, while knowledge depends on genuine meaning, it follows that, from his viewpoint, reason determines knowledge. And hence, reason is the criterion of knowledge. This is why, for Ibn Rushd, although reason and revelation are coherent (given that both of them are created by God), if there is an apparent contradiction between reason and revelation, then revelation should be reinterpreted in light of the conclusions of reason in order for revelation to cohere with reason. In this sense, Ibn Rushd established the doctrine of Islamic rationalism, according to which, reason takes priority over revelation. On the other hand, Ibn Taymiyyah held that meanings are determined by context. And since knowledge entails knowing the genuine meanings of true propositions, it follows, from Ibn Taymiyyah's theory, that context determines knowledge. Hence, the context of the Quran determines Islamic knowledge. It follows, from Ibn Taymiyyah's account, that revelation, rather than independent reasoning, is the criterion of knowledge in the sense that if there is an apparent contradiction between revelation and reason, then the conclusions of reason should be reinterpreted in light of revelation in order to render reason and its conclusions coherent with revelation. In this sense, Ibn Taymiyyah developed Islamic traditionalism in contrast to Islamic rationalism, as it was articulated by Ibn Rushd.

All of this shows that Ibn Rushd's theory of meaning led him to endorse rationalism, while Ibn Taymiyyah's theory of meaning led him to accept traditionalism. In other words, the role of reason in Islamic philosophy was determined by the theories of meaning. This reveals the centrality of the conception of meaning in Islamic philosophy.

Meaning and Creation

The theory of meaning also played an important role in accepting or rejecting the theory of divine emanation. And thus, it played an essential role in the formation of the theories of creation in Islamic philosophy. For example, from the viewpoint of Ibn Sina, meaning is determined by reason. Therefore, the meaning of the concept of God is fixed only if there is an eternal mind comprehending the concept of God and its meaning. This means that the meaning of the concept of God is fixed only by an eternal mind coexisting with God from eternity and contemplating God, although it is supposed to be created by God. Hence, according to Ibn Sina, there should be a certain kind of divine emanation, leading to the emergence of eternal minds comprehending and contemplating God Himself otherwise the meaning of the concept of God would not be fixed. This shows that Ibn Sina's theory of meaning led him to accept and form his version of the theory of divine emanation, as a philosophical theory of creation. The theory of divine emanation holds that the universe emanated from God, i.e. it flowed from God, as the river flows into the sea. It claims that the universe is a natural and spontaneous result of the existence of God, who in fact created it without any effort. And since the world flowed spontaneously from God, it follows that the world is eternal as God is. From the perspective of this philosophical doctrine, God created the universe but through the process of emanation, and He created it from eternity. This theory also emphasizes the idea that God first created a pure intellect, which through its contemplation of God and itself other intellects and the material world had emanated. Ibn Sina accepted this theory of divine emanation because of his account of meaning, while other Muslim philosophers rejected it due to their endorsement of different theories of meaning.

According to the Muslim philosopher Al-Ghazali, meanings are determined by the external facts. For instance, the meaning of the concept "sun" is fixed by the actual sun itself. And since, for Al-Ghazali, meanings are determined by the external facts of the world, it follows that the meaning of the concept of God is determined by God Himself. Thus, for Al-Ghazali, there is no need for divine emanation entailing the existence of eternal intellects in order to fix the meaning of the concept of God. This is how Al-Ghazali's theory of meaning led him to reject the theory of divine emanation. Similarly, Ibn Taymiyyah rejected the theory of divine emanation because he has no need for it in order to fix the meaning of the concept of God. From the viewpoint of Ibn Taymiyyah, meaning is determined by context. And thus, the meaning of the concept of God is determined by the context of religious texts, such as the Quran. Therefore, in light of Ibn Taymiyyah's theory of meaning, there is no need for divine emanation and its eternal intellects in order to account for the fact that the concept God is meaningful. All of this shows that the theories of meaning are the main factors in accepting or rejecting the theory of divine emanation. And therefore, they are the basic foundations which shaped and formed the different philosophical theories of creation in Islamic philosophy. When Al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah rejected the theory of divine emanation, they were left with only one option, which is to accept the view that the world was created by God from nothing. And hence, the world is not eternal. This theological and philosophical position is contrary to the theory of divine emanation, which is considered to be an alternative philosophical theory of creation. According to the theory of divine emanation, the world is eternal because it naturally and spontaneously emanated from God. But, for Al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah, the world is not eternal because it was created by God from nothing. And, as we have seen, Muslim Philosophers disagreed on how the universe was created because they disagreed on how to analyze the concept of meaning. This reveals the fact that Islamic philosophy is a clear example of how one's theory of meaning shapes one's philosophical vision of the world and its creation. In conclusion, the best way to understand Islamic philosophy is through investigating its theories of meaning. This is so because the essential Islamic philosophical paradigms are based on the Islamic conceptions of meaning.

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