The Semantics of Divine Attributes according to Avicenna and Its Relevance with the Issue of Language of Religion

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Abstract:
One of the longstanding questions in philosophy and theology is how to understand and analyze the meanings of attributes which are shared by God and human beings; whether these attributes are predicated to God in ordinary human sense or they have an alternative meaning? This question which initially concerned divine attributes but it gradually got expanded and came to be applied to all propositions of religion and thus different theories were developed about the language of religion. These theories are classified under two general categories: 1- meaningfulness of language of religion, 2- meaninglessness of language of religion.

   Epistemological views in Christian theology comprise theory of analogy and theory of linguistic adjustment but in Islamic theology they are divided into the theory of immanence and the theory of immanence simultaneous with transcendence. Non-epistemological views in Christian theology consist of 1- Logical Positivism, 2- philosophy of linguistic analysis and 3- symbolism or symbolic interpretation while in Islamic theology they are reduced to the theory of pure transcendence or agnosticism.

   Moslem philosophers specially Avicenna have adopted the theory of immanence simultaneous with transcendence. According to Avicenna, the conceptual and extensional union attributes which is resulted due to the transcendence of essence and attributes from all defections and non-existential realities prepares the ground for knowing divine attributes through knowing one's own essence and attributes in a transcendent fashion.

Avicenna and Language of Religion
Avicenna begins his discussion of divine attributes by the unity of essence. Having denied all types of diversity from Divine Essence and demonstrated the pure and true unity of God, Avicenna opens a new horizon before his readers which while insisting on the extensional unity of essence and attributes (and after it the unity of attributes with each other) pave the way for propounding the conceptual communion of attributes with each other and finally the conceptual unity of essence and attributes.

   To demonstrate the extensional unity of essence and attributes, Sheikh argues that Divine Essence has existential necessity. Existential necessity which is one of the most important

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divine attributes requires no diversity whatsoever has access to the essence (Avicenna, 1379: 222; idem, 1376: 56).

Conceptual Identity of Divine Attributes and Essence

The majority of Moslem theosophers believe that divine attributes are extensionally united and conceptually diversified; this idea has also its origin in conceptual similarities of these attributes with human attributes. However, Avicenna against other philosophers holds that divine attributes not only have extensional identity but rather they are also conceptually equivalent (idem, 1363: 21; idem, 1376: 394; idem, 1371: 161).

Avicenna purifies all divine attributes of every imperfection and limitation of human attributes (idem, 1363: 20-21) and thus he is led to the issue of conceptual identity of attributes. The absolute simplicity and unity of Necessary Being makes the abstraction of different concepts from it impossible. To state the matter otherwise, one cannot abstract various concepts from a purely simple essence Divine Essence (idem, 1326: 113). Though later due to the essence's correlation with creatures it can be the source of abstraction different concepts.

It seems that this attitude suggests that divine and human attributes are not conceptually similar and human attributes cannot lead us to divine attributes.

Avicenna does not seemingly stand by this conclusion. In no one of his key works He has not spoken of the inability of reason of knowing and understanding divine attributes; rather he always depicts a rational portrait of divine essence and attributes based on these very human concepts like power, knowledge, will, intellection, good and so on and so forth, of course after purifying them from all imperfections and limitation.

Then conceptual unity of attributes and essence and referring all attributes to pure existence does not stop us from beginning the process of knowing divine attributes from understanding human attributes which can be purified of imperfections and limitations and assist us in touching the meaning of pure and absolute existence (idem, 1376, p. 394; idem, 1371, p. 161). Thus human mind understands divine attributes through a triple staged process.

The Reality of Divine Attributes according to Avicenna

As previously mentioned, Avicenna considers existence as the primary and original meaning of divine attributes and says "the first attribute of Necessary Being is his 'being existent' and 'having existence'" (idem, 1376: 394; idem, 1371: 161).

Finally Sheikh concludes that divine attributes cannot be known in a positive way and they have to be understood in a negative and correlative fashion (idem, 1375: 311). According to Avicenna, the principal attribute of Necessary Being is "existential necessity" and the meaning of some other attributes is this very existence correlated with something-else and the meaning of some others is existence being stripped of imperfections and limitations in a way that no one of them requires diversity and difference in essence.

Conclusion

The analyses of Avicenna's words show that the cause of conceptual union of attributes with essence is nothing but the transcendence of essence and attributes from possible imperfections and non-existential aspects; since transcendence purifies the essence and attributes from diversity and pushes them nearer to simplicity and pureness. Thus according to the maxim of *simple truth is the totality of things and neither one of them*, essence contains all attributes of perfection in pure and absolute form (both extensionally and conceptually). The transcendence of essence from all non-existential aspects and existential imperfections leads us to a pure sense of **existence** which despite its pure simplicity contains all existential perfections together; although this pure reality would be mentioned via different terms due to linguistic restrictions and inability of theological principles. In fact the application of different terms regarding this reality is either due to the correlations which essence has with creature or because of purification of essence from imperfections and non-

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existential aspects and it is not so that different terms have been coined to indicate different sides of the same reality as a purely simple reality does not tolerate any conceptual or extensional diversity whatsoever.

Key Words: Language of Religion, Divine Attributes, Verifiability, Refutability, Symbolic Language, Language Games, Immanence simultaneous with Transcendence, identity of attributes and essence, Avicenna

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