

FROM UNDERSTANDING TO MYSTICAL UNDERSTANDING

Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Linda Zagzebski

By
M. Sami Ulqani

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Department of Philosophy

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Supervisor: Professor Michael Vance Griffin

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بينى و بينك أننى يزاحمنى

فأرفع بأنك أننى من البين

حلاج

Between me and thee,
It is my “I-ness” which is in contention:
Through Thy “it is I”
Remove my “I-ness” from between us

Hallaj

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Introduction

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (born 1933), originally from Iran, is considered the foremost living representative thinker of the traditionalist school. Amongst the thinkers ~~figures~~ of this school were figures such as Rene Guenon, A. K. Coomaraswamy, and Fritjof Schuon. Nasr is also the most widely known thinker of the Islamic philosophical tradition in the contemporary world.¹ His works range from metaphysics, the philosophy and history of science to art, spirituality, and the wide range of Islamic studies. A distinctive mark of his approach towards the subjects of his inquiry is his commitment to the worldview countenanced by the perennial philosophers mentioned above; at the heart of which lies the critique of modernity and defense of traditions. His most important philosophical work is his Gifford Lectures in which he argues for a perspective which is multi-cultural and multi-faith, and sees commonalities among different traditions both within and beyond the religion of Islam.² In the year 2001 the Library of Living Philosophers dedicated a volume to him, which includes critical essays about different aspect of his philosophy; however, studying his ideas from an analytic perspective is still lacking. In an attempt to approach Nasr from an analytic point of view, I will be examining his theory of mystical knowledge in this thesis.

In his article titled “Self-Awareness and Ultimate Selfhood”, Seyyed Hossein Nasr talks about knowledge of the self and the “Ultimate Selfhood”, i.e., God, which are drastically different from knowledge in its usual sense. Relying on Islamic mysticism (*Tasawwuf*) and other mystical traditions of the East like Hinduism and Buddhism, Nasr claims that knowing the true nature of things is dependent on a form of self-awareness that would lead to knowing the Ultimate Self. What links the knowing agents to Ultimate Self is said to be following a particular discipline of

¹ Chittick, *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, p. ix.

² Adamson, *A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy in the Islamic World*, p. 28.

contemplation and spiritual journey, without which they will lack the epistemic status in knowing things as they are. That particular discipline is called the “traditional science of the soul”.

In my thesis I am going to examine how the literature on “understanding” in analytic epistemology can provide the conceptual tools to reformulate Nasr’s notion of knowing in terms of “understanding” and develop a theory of “mystical understanding”. Furthermore, I will be examining the ways in which the discussions on the emergence of skepticism regarding “understanding” would help us block similar problems arising for the “traditional science of the soul”; i.e., what is the thing that guarantees the reliability of the “traditional science of the soul” and how is justified “mystical understanding” distinguished from hallucination and deception.

For this purpose, I will be employing Linda Zagzebski’s account of understanding; investigating if it would capture Nasr’s notion of “grasping the true nature of things”. Hence, the questions that I will be dealing with are the following: how can Zagzebski’s theory of understanding help us make sense of Nasr’s notion of “knowing” the true nature of thing? Is Nasr’s account of knowledge competent enough to justify itself in the face of deception skepticism? All the ways paved; can we develop a sophisticated theory about “mystical understanding” based on Nasr’s account of self-awareness?

This thesis consists of three chapters. In the first chapter I will discuss Nasr’s account of self-awareness, its context, metaphysical foundations, and the questions and problems that emerge from it. The second chapter will be dedicated to the study of Zagzebski’s notion of “understanding” and how she deals with problem of skepticism. In the third chapter, I going to draw a comparison between the two views and see to what extent Nasr’s view is translatable into Zagzebski’s theory

of understanding; additionally, I will introduce a preliminary view on mystical understanding and how to overcome the main problem regarding it, i.e., skepticism.

I. Nasr's Account of Mystical Knowledge

In this chapter, I will be examining the context of Nasr's discussion of self-awareness, the key terms of revelation and intellect, his metaphysical commitment regarding hierarchy of reality, and finally mystical unity and the knowledge that follows from it.

I. 1. Nasr's Starting Point

Nasr primarily provides a historical context to his discussion self-awareness. He starts with a comparison between the rationalistic view of reality in the post-Cartesian West and the traditional conception of reality in the East. According to Nasr, the distinguishing feature of the rationalistic thought which has been prevalent in the last few centuries in West since the early modern period is its commitment to a dual reductionism: “reducing the knowing subject to a single mode of awareness” and reducing “the external world to a spatio-temporal complex limited to a single level of reality”.³ Nasr puts the blame for this shift on the shoulders of the father of modern European philosophy Rene Descartes and his distinguished contemporaries, Spinoza and Leibniz; according to Nasr, it was through the philosophical works of these thinkers that a huge shift was realized in European philosophy at the heart of which lies “the reduction of knowledge to the functioning of the individual reason cut off from the intellect, in both its microcosmic and macrocosmic aspects”.⁴

What Nasr means by “intellect” will be discussed in the next section; but by microcosmic he is referring to the human existence and by macrocosmic to the world independent of humans; a New-Platonic term which sees a corresponding resemblance between the humans and the world in terms of nature and structure.⁵ It seems that Nasr is trying to explain that the negligence of intellect

³ Nasr, “Self-awareness and Ultimate Selfhood”, p. 319.

⁴ Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 34.

⁵ Wildberg. “New-Platonism.”

and a full trust in reason caused the reduction mentioned above; here he creates a distinction between reason cut-off from intellect and reason aided by intellect, and what distinguishes them according to Nasr is the latter's capability in noticing the multiple layers of the human existence (for example, the idea of humans having soul and the soul being of divine nature) and accenting to the vertical levels in the universe, where God stands as the source of existence. Nasr holds Descartes accountable for the divorce between reason and intellect.

According to Nasr's interpretation of *cogito*, while Descartes was in search of a firm basis that would guarantee certainty, he rejected not just "intellect" but also "revelation" as the ultimate cornerstones of certitude, and took refuge in an autonomous reason of *res cogitans*. Nasr thinks that this full reliance on the "individual consciousness of the thinking subject" for gaining certitude, had the inevitable consequence of subordinating being to the individual thinking subject.⁶ This critical approach towards Descartes shades light on Nasr's understanding of what one might call the nature of modern European philosophy in his view, which according to him does not allow the emergence of philosophical theories that would question the very principle of reductionism.⁷ Nasr thinks that the theory of the human self which views the self as an existent subject to gradation or hierarchy is a theory that cannot emerge in the context of the post-Cartesian European philosophy; therefore, He primarily anchors his view regarding the self in mystical schools of the east such as Sufism, Buddhism, and Hinduism that according to him provide the grounds for a psychology and ontology that are committed to the multi-layered-ness of the human existence and the universe.

⁶ Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 34.

⁷ Nasr's interpretation of Descartes, especially regarding revelation seems extremely controversial. Besides the fact that Descartes scholars would not agree with his evaluation of Descartes, I also don't find it satisfactory; what makes it difficult to find his view of Descartes convincing is the lack of a detailed textual analysis of Descartes in his works that would support his conclusions.

Two recurring terms in Nasr's discussion of self-awareness is intellect and revelation. In what follows I will explore his views on these two key terms and provide context for his discourse.

I. 2. Intellect and Revelation

As discussed above, a pivotal term in Nasr's critique of modern European philosophy is intellect. His critique doesn't concern me here; rather what is at the center of focus in this section is the role the term intellect plays in his theory of self-awareness. The importance of this terms comes from that fact that it is through this faculty that according to Nasr awareness of the Absolute is achieved, and subsequently the true nature of things is known.

For Nasr, intellect "involves illumination of the heart and the mind of man and the presence in him of knowledge of an immediate and direct nature which is tested and experienced, the sapience which the Islamic tradition refers to as 'presential knowledge'".⁸ Illumination alludes to the idea that there is a distinct source other than the human mind which illuminates the mind and hence sets the ground for it not to conceive but rather to taste (which means that no concept and language is involved at this level of knowledge) the given knowledge.

Here Nasr relies on the distinction between acquisitional and presential knowledge in Islamic philosophy and equates intellection with presential knowledge. Before delving more into Nasr's notion of "intellect", a few words shall be said about the distinction. Presential knowledge is a key term in Islamic philosophy which refers to an unmediated form of knowledge in which the knower and the known become one and united; for example, humans' knowledge of hunger is classified

⁸ Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 119.

as pertaining to the category of presential knowledge. Presential knowledge is conceived to have four referents:⁹

1. knowledge of the self.
2. Knowledge of psychological states, sentiments, and passions.
3. Knowledge of the perceptive and operative faculties.
4. Knowledge of mental forms and concepts.

However, none of the above cases include the possibility of presential knowledge between two distinct substances which is what Nasr is aiming at in his discussion of presential knowledge. In his particular understanding of presential knowledge, I think Nasr relies on the post-classical school of illumination¹⁰ in the Islamic philosophical tradition. According to this school's view of knowledge, similar to the case where an immaterial cause knows its effects (which according to this view are pure poverty and dependence on the cause) by presence like God's knowledge of the world, an immaterial effect can also know its immaterial cause by presence once there is no barrier between them, like the intellect's (which they take to be immaterial) knowledge of God.¹¹

The common denominator of these types of presential knowledge is said to be infallibility, because falsity and error is considered to be the accident of another form of knowledge known as

⁹ Mesbah, *Amuzeshe Falsafah*, p. 169.

¹⁰ The school of illumination was a philosophical school in the Islamic east founded by Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (1145-1191). This school is known for its original Platonic critique of the Avicennan philosophy which was the dominant school at the time of Suhrawardi. The critiques range from the fields of logic, epistemology to psychology, and metaphysics; additionally, Suhrawardi introduces his own illuminationist theories in the field of epistemology (logic and psychology) and metaphysics (ontology and cosmology). Among his ideas in epistemology are his critique of Avicennan theory of definition, and introducing a theory of 'presential' knowledge, developing a complex ontology of lights, and adding a fourth 'imaginal' world (Marcotte, "Suhrawardi").

¹¹ Tabatabai, *Bidayat-al-Hikmah*, p. 154.

acquisitional knowledge where there is a mediation between the knower and the known. For example, imagine that A informs B who is on vacation about the existence of a snake in B's garden, and if B considers A to be trustworthy, then B forms the judgment that there is a snake in his garden; hence, he gains knowledge about a fact. However, this knowledge can be fallacious, for A might have mistaken rope with snake. What makes B's knowledge subject to harm is that the object of his knowledge is not present before him; there is a mediator between him and his object of knowledge. Now let's imagine that B receives a photo of his garden and notices a long round thing and forms the judgement that there is a snake in his garden. Still, his judgment is not secure from being false, because the object of knowledge is mediated through a photo.

Acquisitional knowledge has two objects: a subjective which is the picture created in B's mind through A's testimony or looking at the photo in the above examples and an objective which is the snake; additionally, it includes a correspondence between the two objects. The reliability of this kind of knowledge lies in the success of correspondence between the subjective and objective objects. Therefore, this species of knowledge is established through "a combination of the outer and inner objects along with the maximum degree of correspondence between them".¹² Hence, a case would be an instance of acquisitional knowledge if there is a knower, the knower's intentionality is directed towards two objects of knowledge, and there is maximum correspondence between the two objects; while in the case of presential knowledge, there is only one object like the feeling of pain, the pain doesn't need to correspond to an outer object in order for the person who feels pain shape the judgement that I feel pain; it is known immediately.

¹² Haeri, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence*, p. 44.

Coming back to Nasr's view of intellect and revelation, the following passage provides further descriptions:

The Intellect is itself divine and only human to the extent that man participates in it. It is a substance as well as a function; it is light as well as vision. The Intellect is not the mind nor is it reason which is the reflection of the Intellect upon the human plane, but it is the root and center of consciousness and what has been traditionally called the soul... Intellect is the source of both knowledge and being, of the subjective conscience which knows and the objective order which is known. It is also the source of revelation which creates a nexus between man and the cosmos and of course the metacosmic Reality... intellection does not reach the truth as a result of profane thought or reasoning but through an a priori direct intuition of the truth. Reasoning may act as an occasion for intellection but it cannot be the cause of intellection.¹³

The above quote shows that Nasr is using the term intellect to refer to at least two different meanings. On the one hand he takes intellect to be an ontological category from which both being and the prime form of knowledge emanate; furthermore, reason and revelation are seen as two manifestations of intellect. With such a definition, it seems totally plausible to think of intellect as something deeply connected to the essence of God in Nasr's ontology. If intellect is the source of being, it must be an expression of God's power and if the prime form of knowledge is realized through participation in the intellect, then it should be pointing at God's knowledge. Reason becomes subordinate to intellect when the latter is understood as an ontological category that renders the function of reason possible in the human plane. However, on the other hand Nasr uses the word intellection as an activity and function of the human mind as something distinct from the function of the mind in the form of reasoning.¹⁴ A plausible interpretation of this idea in the light

¹³ Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 131.

¹⁴ Nasr also uses "revelation" in a more general sense in order to encompass among others "the Orphic Dionysian dimension of Greek tradition", "the Pythagorean-Platonic school", "Hermeticism", and the "metaphysical doctrines of Hinduism" (Ibid., p. 14). For a perennialist like Nasr the characteristic feature of the knowledge produced within these schools is due to its divine dimension and not merely being the output of pure human reason.

of the discussion of the acquisitional-presential distinction in Islamic philosophy that Nasr invokes in his treatment of the issue, is to equate reasoning with discursive knowledge that is inherently intertwined with concepts and propositions and syllogistic argumentation, hence acquisitional knowledge; and intellection with non-propositional way of getting access to reality; i.e., through direct encountering of the object of knowledge without any mediatory tool, hence presential knowledge.

Between intellect as an ontological category and the human reason in the terrestrial plane, Nasr understands revelation as a guiding link that makes participation in the divine intellect accessible for as many individual reasons as possible. Although Nasr sees the door of participation in the divine intellect open and the possibility of intellection at the disposal of all individual reasons, still he contends that there is a justified need for revelation. Here is how he explains the justification:

Although the intellect shines within the being of man, man is too far removed from his primordial nature to be able to make full use of this divine gift by himself. He needs revelation which alone can actualize the intellect in man and allow it to function properly... revelation actualizes the possibilities of the intellect, removes impediments of the carnal soul which prevent the intellect from functioning, and makes possible the transmission of an initiatic knowledge which at the same time resides within the very substance of the intellect.¹⁵

According to the above quote, the human reason in its essence does not need revelation in order to benefit from the light of the intellect, but it is due to an accidental factor which is the state of being distanced from its pure stage. Reason in essence is conceived as a divine faculty; however, in its fallen state which is equated with the state of forgetfulness and self-alienation, reason needs an external aid to make it capable of receiving knowledge that comes from the Divine. Therefore, for Nasr revelation plays a facilitating role here; by bringing reality closer to the human

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 132.

mind persuades it to strive towards reality in order to experience the immediate engagement with it; revelation provides the needed incentive for the mind to go beyond its discursive functions. Revelation here can be read in both general sense and particular sense, each interpretation having its distinct consequence. In its particular sense, only the message and teachings contained in established religions which Nasr calls them “authentic religion”¹⁶ like Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism can play the facilitating role, and therefore the elements of faith and practice would be indispensable conditions for the human mind to benefit from the “initiativ knowledge”¹⁷ facilitated by them.

This interpretation would have an unwanted consequence for Nasr which is to deny that Plato and Pythagoras were the bearers of the divine illuminated knowledge; whereas, as hinted at above he clearly assents to the idea that “the Orphic Dionysian dimension of Greek tradition” and “the Pythagorean-Platonic school” contains divine illumination. Therefore, it is plausible to take revelation here in its more general sense which encompasses the wisdom contained in the philosophical and mystical traditions beyond the scope of established religions. The following passage where Nasr talks about the gap between reason aided by revelation and the unaided reason should also be interpreted along the above lines:

There is an unbridgeable hiatus between intelligence sanctified by revelation and the intelligence which, cut off from this source and also from its own roots, is reduced to its reflection upon the human mind and atrophied into that truncated and fragmented faculty which is considered scientifically as intelligence.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 64. By “authentic”, Nasr wants to exclude man-made religions that do not contain a divine message.

¹⁷ “Initiatic knowledge” is another expression of the self-knowledge which is intertwined with the knowledge of God. For a detailed study of initiation and initiatic knowledge see Millar, *The Three Stages of Initiatic Spirituality: Craftsman, Warrior, Magician*, Ch. 14.

¹⁸ Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 132.

I. 3. Hierarchy and Correspondence

Nasr contends, reality in the traditional view is believed to be hierarchical; both in its subjective domain and the objective realm. In his own words, in the metaphysical teachings of the East “not only are there many levels of reality or existence stretching from the material plane to Absolute and Infinite Reality, but there are so many levels of subjective reality or consciousness”.¹⁹ I suspect that Nasr is basing his view on the doctrine of gradation of existence in Mulla Sadra²⁰ which is about the reality of existence being both singular and subject to gradation. According to Mulla Sadra existence is a singular reality, and what our phenomenal experience show as multiplicity is illusory. How then Mulla Sadra explains multiplicity in this world? He contends that multiple existents in the world are different degrees of a single whole. The chain of existence connects all the horizontal and vertical hierarchy of existents.²¹

A key implication of such a view of reality is assenting to the fact that each level of the subjective reality is in a particular knowing relation with a level of the objective reality appropriate to it. For example, sense perception deals with a particular domain of reality which is some aspects of the material world; the material world is the appropriate object of perceiving for sense perception. Likewise, to give a Nasrian example, grasping the unity of the world of existence is the function of the mind enlightened by the intellect, hence that unity is the appropriate object of

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 131.

²⁰ Mulla Sadra (ca. 1571-1636), the founder of transcendent philosophy, is one of the most influential Islamic philosophers in the post-classical period, i.e., the period after Avicenna. He is known for his synthesis of philosophy, mysticism, and theology, and the doctrine that reality is better known through the combination of rationality, spirituality, and scripture. See Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (1978). *Sadr al-Din Shirazi and his Transcendent Theosophy: Background, life and works*. Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy.

²¹ Rizvi, “Mulla Sadra”.

the enlightened reason. What makes a domain of reality appropriate to a particular level of consciousness²² is being within the scope of the reach of that level of consciousness.

However, the correspondence relation does not seem obvious and one can argue that the correspondence does not follow from the idea that each domain has levels; even if one accepts for the sake of argument that the human knowing subject enjoys multiple layers of consciousness and likewise the mind-independent world is also multi-layered, there still remains a gap between assenting to this idea and claiming that each level of human consciousness corresponds to its appropriate domain of reality in the objective world.

In an attempt to defend the idea that correspondence is an unavoidable consequence of the hierarchical view of reality, the following argument will be introduced:

P1. The relational view of knowledge which considers relationality as the essence of knowing, is at least an intuitive and commonsensical account of knowledge.²³

P2. Knowledge in P1 comes out of consciousness, i.e., consciousness is a special source of knowledge. Just by being aware of the conscious features of his experience, a person has knowledge of them. Furthermore, only beings which are capable of consciousness can have

²² Consciousness, awareness, and knowledge are used interchangeably throughout the text, unless otherwise stated.

²³ According to this view, what constitutes knowledge is “being knowledge of something”; therefore, it always needs an object by definition. The validity of this view of knowledge comes from the fact that “know” is a transitive verb and whenever one says I know, he always knows something. Additionally, “know” is factive (contrary to “believe”), so what one knows, i.e., the object of knowledge must exist. These two reasons make the idea of relationality of knowledge plausible. Among the three forms of knowledge, i.e., factual, propositional, and know-how, clearly factual and propositional, which are the two most paradigmatic forms of knowledge, are relational. For example, in knowing that $2+2=4$ or knowing things like knowing Vienna, knowledge is directed at a proposition and a fact; without the existence of the proposition and the fact, there won’t exist these two forms of knowledge. With regards to know-how, it can be argued that it is less relational. For example, if one knows how to swim, the following question can plausibly be asked: is “knowing” in I know how to swim, a relation to swimming? However, it is clearly natural to say this case is an instance of knowing how of swimming; knowledge here is relational to whatever that constitutes “how to swim”, i.e., swimming skills.

knowledge. Most peoples' intuition would support this.²⁴ If the multi-layeredness of consciousness is taken for granted, and each level of consciousness is given its area of activity, then it follows that each level of consciousness is dealing with its proper object which is within the domain of its accessibility. Hence, each level of consciousness provides the ground for knowledge of something; therefore, similar to P1 relationality also constitutes the character of all levels of consciousness.²⁵

P3. There is a particular relation between each level of consciousness and the objects that each level is directed at. Moreover, the relation is a necessary consequence of the definition of knowledge; therefore, if one denies the relation, he would need to deny the definition of knowledge constituted by relationality.²⁶ If he does so, he is clearly standing against a strong intuition shared by our commonsensical understanding of the notion of knowledge. This particular relation between the subjective stages of knowing and the objective levels of reality is what the term correspondence refers to.

C1. The correspondence follows from the idea that each domain has levels.²⁷

²⁴ It seems to me that one should be cautious with this claim. The claim that only conscious beings can have knowledge does not seem obvious.

²⁵ However, there seems to be forms of consciousness which are clearly not knowledge, like false judgements.

²⁶ I will examine the question whether the denial of the suggested definition is irrational or not. If the rejecting the proposed definition does not have any irrational consequence, and another plausible view of knowledge can be substituted for it, then the basis of argument will fall down. In order to block the arbitrariness of the definition, an argument should be presented that would justify preferring this particular view over the competing ones.

²⁷ The correspondence implied here is a one to one. However, there are two other ways of looking at the correspondence relation: a) distinct levels of knowledge correspond to the same level of reality; and 2) different levels of reality correspond to the same level of knowledge.

I. 4. Self-awareness

At the heart of the idea of gradation of reality, lies the distinction between “knowing selves” and “the Ultimate Self”. The knowing selves surely²⁸ enjoy some sort of self-awareness and can obtain knowledge of the external world. However, their capability and what they can potentially reach is far beyond the usual forms of knowledge that they normally obtain²⁹; the culmination of knowing for the knowing selves is knowing the Ultimate Self which is only obtainable through an ontological unity with the Him.³⁰ This ontological unity enables the knowing selves to see themselves, the world and their relation with the Divine in an absolutely unique way that is never obtainable by the use of discursive reasoning and with the aid of acquisitional knowledge.³¹ The gist of this ultimate form of knowledge is grasping the grounding relation between the Divine and the rest of the world of being and witnessing with the eye of intellect how the latter is tethered to the former.

However, there needs to be said something about the idea of “ontological unity” with God. The idea of annihilation in the ocean of the absolute countenanced by the mystics should not be taken in its literal sense. In the path of spiritual becoming, the mystic starts from the stage of contemplating on his own self and discovers in himself a sign which guides him towards the idea that he is not an independent self-subsisting being, but rather a manifestation of a greater being. However, this basic mystical intuition does not satisfy the mystic; therefore, he embarks in a spiritual journey, following the methods and injunctions put at his disposal by the “traditional

²⁸ This assurance or certitude comes from the shared intuitions among the knowing subjects. The validity of this certitude cannot be questioned except by adhering to a very strong version of skepticism.

²⁹ By the “usual forms of knowledge” I simply mean the ones that are based on sense perception and logical analysis; forms of knowledge that are accessible to every healthy person without recurrence to any unusual and extra labor like that of mystics.

³⁰ Nasr, “Self-awareness and Ultimate Selfhood”, p. 319.

³¹ Ibid., p. 325.

sciences of the soul”,³² to gain a more perfect knowledge of the greater being. By successfully following those injunctions, reaches a stage where he witnesses his existence as pure dependence and tethered to the Being. “Ontological unity” refers to this stage which is said to be the culmination of mystical experience. The term ontological alludes to the idea that the mystic sees himself as a spark of the light of Being; hence, he does not affirm an existence for himself alongside Being, rather the only property that he can attribute to his existence is pure poverty and dependence. In other words, the mystic sees one Being as the absolute, and considers other beings which are normally considered distinct ontological entities, as the waves of that One ocean of Being.

For Nasr, the only tool which can enable the knowing selves to firstly gain self-awareness and understand their own structure and secondly and in the light of that self-awareness and “appropriate spiritual disciplines”, succeed in reaching their Origin, the realization of the Ultimate Self, is the traditional science of the soul or the traditional disciplines of contemplation.³³ Hence, Nasr contends that one cannot expect modern psychology which is limited to “experimenting with the boundaries of the psyche”³⁴ to transform the knowing selves and enable them in grasping the state of tethered-ness. However, He doesn’t address the problem of skepticism regarding the idea of traditional science of the soul which he takes to be conducive to grasping the tethered-ness. Nasr contends that since the output of following the traditional science of the soul is a valuable epistemic state, therefore the traditional science of the soul is trustworthy; it is an argument from the value of effect to the value of cause. Although this argument might seem convincing for a practitioner

³² According to Nasr, traditional science of the soul does grapple with questions pertaining to sense perception, inner experiences, contact and communication with other conscious beings. However, its main focus is on question regarding the nature of the self, the “I” which is seen as the chief mean to reach the Ultimate Self (Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science*, p. 16).

³³ Nasr, “Self-Awareness and Ultimate Selfhood, p 323.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 321.

of for example Sufism, because he might have tasted what he understands to be the effect of adhering to Sufi practices; yet, the argument cannot successfully communicate to a non-practitioner, because the argument for a non-practitioner is self-referring.

Nevertheless, the following argument can be extracted from Nasr's discussion of modern psychology which can indirectly serve as a supporting ground for the reliability of the traditional psychology.³⁵:

P1. Understanding a phenomenon requires its comprehension. Comprehension by definition means "to encompass". Therefore, there is hierarchy of one who comprehends and the thing comprehended; on the top of the hierarchy is the subject of comprehension and the subordinate stage is the object of comprehension. In this picture, only the higher knows the lower and the "greater knows the lesser".

P2. Modern psychology rejects the idea that there is higher level of reality than the psyche within the human existence and does not have an understanding of the idea of the hierarchy of being.

P3. There cannot be a true science of the soul without an understanding of the hierarchical view of human existence.

C1. Modern psychology is not a true science of the soul. On the opposite traditional psychology is the true science of the soul.³⁶

³⁵ Nasr, "On the Science of the Soul: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr", p. 194.

³⁶ The argument does not deny that in modern psychology some aspects of the human psyche is understood. Although Nasr accepts that modern psychologists are not striving in vain, but he does not grant them the authority to issue judgment about the totality of the human existence.

The argument still doesn't seem to guarantee the reliability of traditional psychology, because even if one accepts P3 and the idea that traditional psychology satisfies P3, still it doesn't show that in practice traditional psychology will bring about such and such effect.

II. Linda Zagzebski on Understanding

In this chapter I will firstly discuss Zagzebski's notion of understanding and what she thinks are its constitutive elements; then I am going to examine the question of success in gaining understanding and how the danger of skepticism is dealt with.

II. 1. Zagzebski's Starting Point

In "Recovering Understanding", Zagzebski conceives understanding as an epistemic virtue which has been the central topic in Plato and Aristotle's epistemology, as well in the medieval and early modern period in Western philosophy.³⁷ However, she contends that there are periods in the history of philosophy, including our time, that understanding is not given the attention as a topic of philosophical investigation. She argues that the neglect of understanding has created ambiguities in its meaning and therefore the ancient meaning of it has been lost. Her work on understanding is meant to serve the purpose of resuscitating its ancient meaning and proving a proper place for it in epistemology.

II. 2. What is Understanding?

Zagzebski defines understanding as "the grasp of structure" and structure as "what gives an object unity", so anything that enjoys some sort of structure can be captured by understanding like "a living organism, an event, a narrative, a piece of music, a work of art, a metaphysical system, a philosophical argument, a causal relation, the stock market, human intentional action, a moral

³⁷ Zagzebski, "Recovering Understanding", p. 237.

theory”.³⁸ The diversity of examples show that understanding can encompass different sorts of minor and major objects.

Let’s examine some examples closely. Ibn Sina, a Persian philosopher of 11th century, who is known out of the Islamic context with his medieval Latin name Avicenna, built a full-blown metaphysical system by self-consciously engaging with the Greek philosophical tradition, particularly Aristotle, and introduced his own innovative ideas. In building his philosophical edifice, he relied on the works transmitted to him through the Baghdad school of 9th and 10th centuries; added to this was his engagement with the sort of ideas introduced and countenanced by Muslim theologians (*mutakallimun*). Furthermore, he had some important teachers whose work still survive and some excellent students who have recorded their conversations with Avicenna which are still available. Within such a context he establishes his own philosophical system which is presented in the corpus of his works, some of which are directly related to metaphysics and some contain ideas which are in the intersection of philosophy and science such as his work on medicine *Canon of Medicine* where he introduces his theory of science. As the reader sees, the example is about the structure of Avicenna’s philosophy. What would it mean to understand Avicenna’s philosophy and what are its requirements? Zagzebski would reply that understanding Avicenna’s philosophical system would require knowing what he is building on, i.e., the works produced in the Baghdad school, the writings of his teachers and his documented discourses with his students,

³⁸ Zagzebski, “Toward a Theory of Understanding”, p. 124. Zagzebski gives credit to Pythagoras among ancient thinkers as the person who used in full capacity this aspect of the human mind: “Pythagoras produced some of the most impressive feats of the human ability to perceive structure. His discoveries in geometry led to the view that the entire universe has a mathematical structure, and with that insight, he discovered the musical intervals, mapped the stars, and created a fascinating ethical system in which natural laws of harmony apply to the human soul and to the state. So, the Pythagoreans had the ability to see recurring the domains of musical harmony, morality, and human destiny” (Ibid., p. 123). She also thinks that the idea of form in Aristotle serve as another historical root for her view of about structure: “Aristotle thought that in perception and in thought, the form of a thing is imprinted on our minds. The form an object is what the mind grasps... what makes something a *something* is its form, or its structure” (Ibid., pp. 125-126).

being familiar with the background of his entanglement with the ideas of the Muslim theologians and most importantly knowing how his own ideas are interrelated.³⁹ It is through synthesizing all these elements and creating a unity out of it that understanding Avicenna's philosophical system can be borne. This is an example of a major object of understanding.

Zagzebski also allows the interconnection between different objects of understanding⁴⁰; for instance, a minor object of understanding can be part and parcel of a major object of understanding. To give an example from Avicenna's philosophy again, the essence-existence distinction theory is part of Avicenna's philosophical system, the former is a philosophical idea and the latter is the system within which that idea occupies a place. Although they are interconnected in terms of part and whole; nevertheless, one can separate them and treat each of them a distinct object of understanding.

Let's examine in detail the example of a minor object of understanding hinted at above. Avicenna provides an argument for the distinction between essence and existence; a distinction that did not have a proper place in Aristotle's philosophy.⁴¹ The argument hinges on two ways of looking at essence:

³⁹ Funnily, Peter Adamson uses two key terms in a context very similar to ours while talking about what ought to be done to perfectly know Avicenna: "Indeed, *understanding* Ibn Sina requires *grasping* the interconnections between the different areas of his thought" (Adamson, *A Very Short Introduction to Ibn Sina*, p. 2). A very interesting coincidence!

⁴⁰ Let's have a look at Zagzebski's examples: event-narrative, causal relation-event, intentional act-event/ a person's motivational system, planet-solar system, solar system-larger celestial systems, and larger celestial systems-the physical universe (Zagzebski, *Toward A Theory of Understanding*, p. 125). Zagzebski's view of the interconnectivity between the objects of understanding and illustrated through the provided examples show that 1- understanding is multi-layered and is subject to gradation; and 2- there is no single minor object of understanding that cannot be posited with a broader domain; or every single object of understanding is at least interconnected with one another object of understanding; 3- the sum of the interconnections between objects of understanding inevitably culminates in understanding of a kind of totality that does not miss anything out. The totality grasped at the highest stage is understanding the whole world of being as unity.

⁴¹ Izutsu, *The Concept and Reality of Existence*, p. 27.

1. Essence (*mahiyya*) and reality (*haqiqa*) which are used synonymously in the pre-actualization state; the state of essence *per se*.⁴² An essence in this state is above being one or many, universal or particular, existent or non-existent. Avicenna also uses the terms nature (*Tabi'a*) and natural universal (*Kulli Tabi'i*) to indicate “essence” in the state of purity.⁴³
2. Essence/reality as actualized *in concreto*, by the addition (*idafah*) of “existence” to it. As Izutsu puts it, “existence” in Avicenna’s system is “something which cannot be accounted for by the essential nature of ‘quiddity’ alone. It is something more than ‘quiddity’, something added (*za'id*) to it”.⁴⁴

Avicenna inherited this approach to the analysis of essence-existence relation from his predecessor Farabi who has clearly spoken about their distinction and the occurrence of existence to essence in *Fusus al-Hikma*.⁴⁵ Both Farabi and Avicenna were inspired by the problem of creation as addressed in the Qur'an and the distinction-occurrence theory was intended to provide a philosophical explanation for the Qur'anic verses of creation. According to Zagzebski, if one tends to understand this theory, he should aim at capturing its structure, and its structure is not just the lines stating the theory, but also between the lines of the theory, i.e., reading the historical-cultural background of the theory. Therefore, if one claims that the essence-existence distinction in Avicenna is rooted in Aristotle by comparing Avicenna's text with Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and *Posterior Analytics* fails to understand the theory, simply by failing to notice the religious context of the theory.

⁴² “*bi-ma hiya tilka al-mahiyyah aw min hathu hiya hiya*” which means in so far as it is that “essence” itself.

⁴³ Ibn Sina, *Al-Ilahiyat min Kitab al-Shifa*, p.15.

⁴⁴ Izutsu, *The Concept and Reality of Existence*, p. 97.

⁴⁵ Farabi, *Fusus al-Hikmah*, p. 3-4.

II. 3. Features of Understanding

According to Zagzebski, understanding is comprised of the following elements:

1. Understanding is *techne* dependent. In acquiring understanding, one needs to master a *techne*; *techne* is defined as a set of practical skills that one can obtain; these skills are the ground for the emergence of certain practical activities. A key point about *techne* and how it sets the floor for the rise of understanding is that the practical skills comprising a *techne* are not completely cognitive⁴⁶; whilst the ensuing understanding is pure cognitive. Hence, understanding does not just come out of a single fountain, i.e., one that involves cognitive reasoning; but rather action is also a determining factor in the formation of understanding.⁴⁷ Zagzebski also thinks that “valuable epistemic properties of agents produce valuable epistemic states of agents”,⁴⁸ and the state of understanding can be one instance of valuable epistemic states. This aspect of her idea is connected to virtue epistemology; understanding is born out of virtues.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ The question whether there can be purely cognitive practical skills such as those of mathematicians or chess players does not pose challenge to the above claim, because it is not obvious that mathematics and chess are reducible to purely cognitive skills. It seems that the mere practice of playing chess and doing mathematical calculations is something distinct from the background knowledge of them. It seems plausible to say that one can have all the needed cognitive practical skills for playing chess, but still learns something extra by actually playing it; and it is not clear whether the act of playing chess or doing mathematics is always carried reflectively. Additionally, where do all those purely cognitive practical skills come from in the first place? To illustrate this point with another example, imagine a person who is expert in ethics; however, his knowledge of what are moral virtues and vices and what constitutes a moral life, and how good habits should be inculcated in one's soul, can never provide him with a meta-conceptual understanding of the life of a saint. In order to understand it, one needs to taste it, and that is gained through practice which surely is aided by cognitive know-hows, but in and of itself is distinct from a cognitive process.

⁴⁷ Zagzebski, “Recovering Understanding”, p. 240.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 248.

⁴⁹ In short, the idea says that there are certain intellectual traits such as intellectual humility, intellectual fairness, intellectual courage, perseverance, and fairness that increase the level of success in truth or understanding which is an epistemic end (Zagzebski, “Knowledge and the Motive for Truth”, pp. 3, 6).

2. Understanding is not directed at discrete propositions.⁵⁰ What corresponds to one's understanding is not a set of propositions without there being any connection between them; rather the object of understanding is a package of knowledge which includes multiple elements⁵¹, and one who understands it, sees how the elements are related to each other, and furthermore in what way the multiple parts are related to the whole. For example, one who understands the geography of sciences, is not just an expert in a branch of science such as physics; he further needs to know what is the status of physics among other sciences and what level does it hold in the classification of knowledge in general. In this example, the package of knowledge includes expertise in the science of physics, knowing it's status among other experimental sciences, and knowing where does it stand in the overall geography of knowledge.

3. Understanding “involves representing some portion of the world non-propositionally”.⁵² This feature alludes to the multi-layered-ness of the structure of reality; some levels of the world cannot be represented by propositions. It can also be interpreted as the idea of reality having not just horizontal but also vertical structures⁵³; vertical structures of reality suggest that there is a hierarchy between the structures. Certainly, propositions capture some aspect of reality or some structures in the hierarchy of reality and to that extent they are legitimate knowing tools. However, the structures of reality transcend the limits and boundaries of propositional knowledge⁵⁴, and

⁵⁰ Zagzebski, “Recovering Understanding”, p. 241.

⁵¹ Zagzebski seems to hold two different views with regards to the status of propositional knowledge. In *Recovering Understanding* she denies the idea that discrete propositions can be objects of understanding, while in *Toward a Theory of Understanding*, she clearly accepts knowledge of discrete propositions as cases of understanding.

⁵² Zagzebski, “Recovering Understanding”, p. 242.

⁵³ However, Occam's razor would question this interpretation, because it imposes more ontological commitment on the text.

⁵⁴ This claim is based on the hierarchical view of the subjective and objective reality. As discussed in the first chapter, each stage of human consciousness is dealing with its proper objects of cognition. Propositional knowledge is one of the stages with its particular objects of cognition; however, the domain of mystical annihilation which deals with higher form of knowing, i.e., immediate witnessing of the intelligible, is not within the boundaries of propositional

grasping the non-propositional dimension of reality⁵⁵ falls within the boundary of understanding. However, Zagzebski does contend that since understanding is fundamentally about grasping the structure, and propositional knowledge is knowledge of a propositional structure, it can be an instance of understanding. Here is what she says: “true belief is the grasp of a propositional structure, and so it is a special case of understanding. Since knowledge is a special case of true belief, knowledge is a special case of understanding”.⁵⁶

4. “Understanding makes its bearer reliable in carrying out the goals of the *techne*”. This feature basically says that understanding is “the property of persons”, persons carry understanding not propositions or the state of a person believing a proposition.⁵⁷ The idea that understanding is the property of persons is similar to the idea that virtues or character traits reside in moral agents.

5. Understanding requires simplifying what we are trying to grasp. The bigger and more complex something is, the more we need to simplify it by leaving out certain details that might be important in other contexts. Think of a map: it omits many physical details to be useful. A map of a large area leaves out more details than a map of a smaller area, as too many details can overwhelm us and hinder understanding. Simplifying helps us focus on the big picture. However, sometimes we need those omitted details, so we might use a more detailed map or zoom in. What we consider the “whole” depends on our specific needs. For instance, I might like looking at a globe, but if I

knowledge. I think Zagzebski wouldn’t have any problem with the hierarchical view of reality in its subjective and objective level.

⁵⁵ The non-propositional dimension of reality is the state where things are interconnected and form a totality. Grasping the totality is what is beyond the capacity of propositional knowledge.

⁵⁶ Zagzebski, “Toward a Theory of Understanding”, p. 126.

⁵⁷ Zagzebski, “Recovering Understanding”, p. 245.

need to find a specific building on my campus, I would use a campus map, not a globe or a map of North America.⁵⁸

II. 4. Deception Skepticism

With all these features present in an instance of understanding, there is still the possibility of illusory entering the scene. What guarantees that understanding is not deceptive? Zagzebski thinks, there are two elements that secure the success of understanding: 1- “internally accessible criterion”; the success lies within the practice of *techne* and 2- the existence of “conscious transparency”; one always understands that he understands.⁵⁹ These two elements guard understanding from skepticism.

Zagzebski’s two criteria needs more elaboration. The first element, suggests that understanding is grounded in criteria that are directly accessible to the individual. These criteria are not external standards imposed from outside but are intrinsic to the practice of *techne* which involves a mastery of methods and techniques that are internally validated through practice and experience. This notion aligns with the idea that true understanding requires a kind of intimate familiarity and competence that is self-evident to the practitioner. For instance, a musician's understanding of music is demonstrated through their ability to play and interpret pieces proficiently, guided by an internal sense of correctness and technique honed through practice. Thus, the success of understanding, in this view, is anchored in the individual's capacity to apply and reflect on their skills, making it resistant to external doubt or skepticism.

⁵⁸ Zagzebski, “Toward a Theory of Understanding”, p. 125.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 246.

The second element, posits that understanding is accompanied by an awareness that one understands. This concept implies a meta-cognitive dimension where the individual not only grasps the content or skill but is also aware of their own grasp. It introduces a reflective layer to understanding, where one can assess and affirm their cognitive state. Conscious transparency acts as a safeguard against deception because it requires the individual to have a clear and distinct awareness of their understanding. If one is aware of their understanding, they can differentiate between genuine comprehension and mere appearance of understanding. This reflective self-awareness is crucial in identifying and correcting errors, thereby ensuring that the understanding is not illusory.

Together, these two elements form a defense against skepticism. Internally accessible criteria ensure that understanding is rooted in the practitioner's skilled application and self-evident standards, while conscious transparency provides the reflective awareness needed to affirm the authenticity of that understanding. By combining practical competence with reflective self-awareness, Zagzebski offers a model where understanding is both practically validated and consciously affirmed. However, one might question whether these safeguards are infallible. Internally accessible criteria depend heavily on the individual's subjective experience and mastery, which can be fallible or biased. Similarly, conscious transparency assumes a level of meta-cognitive clarity that may not always be present, as self-deception or cognitive biases can cloud one's awareness.

III. Toward a Theory of Mystical Understanding

In this chapter I will draw a comparison between Nasr's account of mystical knowledge and Zagzebski's notion of understanding in order to find the unifying ground which would make the translation of Nasr's view of mystical knowledge into Zagzebski's idea of understanding possible. Through the comparative analysis I am aiming at developing a theory of mystical understanding, and I will further examine the problem of skepticism arising for it.

III. 1. Comparison

Nasr's account of self-awareness and knowing the Ultimate Selfhood invites us to reflect on a form of knowledge and a type of vision which the spiritual wayfarer reaches through following the path of mystical experience. I argue that the ultimate vision and the supreme knowledge that Nasr thinks is the peak of all forms of knowledge can sophisticatedly be reformulated in terms of Zagzebski's account of understanding. The reasons for this conviction are the following:

1. Both Nasr and Zagzebski believe that reality does not have one layer and cannot be reduced to a single level. Nasr talks about the hierarchy of reality in the extra-mental domain, stretching from the material world to the Transcendent Reality beyond, and Zagzebski contends that there are structures of reality rather than just a dimension of the world which is just accessible to our propositional knowledge; propositional knowledge does not capture all forms of structures.

Besides this recognition, the knowing subjects are also believed to have levels of cognitive abilities; hence, Nasr speaks of "levels of subjective consciousness, many envelopes of the self"; each level of subjective consciousness is in touch with a corresponding level in the extra-mental plane. I think that the hierarchical view of reality provides the metaphysical foundation for both Nasr and Zagzebski in talking about their distinguished forms of understanding.

2. According to Zagzebski, understanding is mainly non-propositional. Similarly, for Nasr, when the knowing selves embark into the journey of knowledge by contemplating over their nature, there is no conceptual mediation between the intellect and the intelligible, or discursive reasoning aiding the intellect. These two are the properties of acquisitional knowledge which is always couched in the form of propositions and conveyed through propositions. However, the mystic transcends the levels of reality which can be captured in the form of propositions and starts experiencing realms that concepts and words have not been invented to describe them.

3. Nasr's traditional science of the soul is an art inspired by revelation in the general sense and is deeply connected to practice. Undoubtedly, the traditional science of the soul cannot be cut off from the metaphysics that it is built on, but the metaphysics is not all what constitutes the science. The science is primarily dealing with transforming persons from a state of self-awareness to the state of mirroring the Self,⁶⁰ and therefore it will be of no use if practical aspect of the science is neglected. It is this aspect which makes the traditional science of the soul similar to *techne*. As hinted at above, for Zagzebski, understanding is *techne* dependent; similarly, Nasr thinks that without following the injunctions of the science of the soul, one cannot go through the in-depth becoming which would culminate in the awareness of the Absolute.

4. According to Nasr, when the mystic reaches the level of ontological union with the Absolute, all the multiplicity fades away before his eyes and everything is seen in a kind transcendental unity. However, this unity does not lead to divinizing the world, but rather the world; i.e., all beings other than God, is seen as existentially dependent on the Divine and tethered to Him.⁶¹ This aspect of

⁶⁰ By mirroring the Self Nasr means the state where the knowing self sees himself as a manifestation or disclosure of the Ultimate Self. He sees in himself the Self.

⁶¹ One might argue that it is acceptable based on propositional knowledge. I agree with it; however, what makes the mystic's grasp of this idea and discursive philosopher's assent to it different, is the qualitative aspect of the mystical experience. It is exactly like the difference between knowing that sugar is sweet and tasting its sweetness.

mystical experience, satisfies Zagzebski's condition that the object of understanding is a totality in which the subject is aware of the relation between the parts and how parts are related to the whole.

III. 2. Mystical Understanding

In this section I will develop a theory of mystical understanding as a plausible kind of understanding alongside the ones introduced by Linda Zagzebski. I will further examine the problems that arise with regards to it such as the question why a non-mystic or an atheist should accept the epistemic reliability of mystical understanding in mirroring reality.

III. 2. 1. What is Mystical Understanding?

Mystical understanding is a kind of understanding where the subject of understanding is a mystic, the method of getting access to it is the traditional science of the soul, and its object is a structure which manifests the world's tethered-ness to God. In answering who is a mystic, I am relying on the definition of mystic provided by Avicenna. In the *Remarks and Admonitions* when he talks about the differences between an ascetic, a worshiper, and a mystic, he defines mystic as one who "disposes one's thought toward the sanctity of divine power, seeking the perpetual illumination of the light of Truth into one's innermost thought".⁶²

As we see in the definition, the fulfillment of three elements is necessary so that a person could be called a mystic. Firstly, the person should go through the process of constant struggle of directing his mind towards the different domain of reality in contrast to what is known to him

⁶² Avicenna, *Remarks and Admonitions*, p. 81.

through sense perception and logical reasoning; one should labor laboriously to penetrate the domain which primarily is determined by the enlightening presence of truth. Secondly, the faculty by which the mystic stands in an understanding relation with the object of understanding is his innermost self (*sirrihi*). This element draws a line between a mystic and a discursive philosopher in terms of how they approach reality; for a discursive philosopher it is clearly reason that is seen as the only savior in the pursuit of knowledge, however for a mystic it is another level of consciousness which embraces reality. Thirdly, the object of a mystic's thoughtful intentionality is determined by light, a metaphorical expression which alludes to the presence of the object not in the form of concepts and language.

Here is what Avicenna says about the method of a mystic that Nasr calls the traditional science of the soul: "... it is abstinence from that which distracts one's innermost thought from the Truth and an elevation over everything other than the Truth... it is a kind of exercise of one's faculties (*himamih*), including the estimative and imaginative powers of one's soul, to orient them by habit from the side of error to the side of the Truth. Thus, they become receptive to the private innermost thought of the soul, so that, when this thought seeks the revelation of the truth, these powers will not be in conflict with it".⁶³

This quote delves into the idea of a mystic aligning his inner faculties with the pursuit of truth. It speaks to the necessity of abstaining from distractions that divert the deepest thoughts from the ultimate truth. This abstinence is not merely a physical or external act but an internal discipline that elevates the mind above mundane concerns, focusing it solely on the truth. The process described is an exercise of one's faculties, including the estimative and imaginative powers of the

⁶³ Ibid., p. 82.

soul. These faculties, often prone to error, must be habitually oriented towards the truth. This reorientation requires consistent effort and discipline, gradually training these powers to move away from falsehood and towards truth. The goal is to make these faculties receptive to the innermost thoughts of the soul.

When one's innermost thoughts seek the revelation of truth, having faculties that are not in conflict with this pursuit is crucial. By habituating these faculties to align with truth, they become allies rather than obstacles. This harmonious state allows for a clearer, more unobstructed reception of truth, facilitating a deeper and more authentic understanding. Thus, Avicenna is highlighting the intricate relationship between inner discipline and the pursuit of truth. He suggests that true understanding for a mystic requires not just intellectual effort but a holistic reorientation of his entire being towards truth. By cultivating a disciplined, truth-oriented mind, he can achieve a state where his faculties support rather than hinder his quest for truth, leading to a more profound and genuine apprehension of reality.

With regards to the object of mystical understanding, it is firstly grasping the existence of the One Being, secondly the connected-ness of the beings to each other, and finally the tethered-ness of the whole world of beings to the One Being.

III. 2. 2. How is mystical understanding distinct from other kinds of understanding?

What mainly distinguishes mystical understanding from others kinds of understanding such as the ones gained through looking at the map of a geographical area or laws of nature is that although they all deal with a structure that transcends propositional formulations, mystical understanding deals with the ultimate structure of reality where on the one side stands the Ultimate Being and on

the other the self-disclosure of the Ultimate Being which is the world; no other structure is comprehensible beyond it. Therefore, the difference is in the grandeur of the object of mystical understanding; it is a structure which is not surpassed by a higher structure. Furthermore, mystical understanding is not easily accessible to all persons as other kinds are; it needs an extra labor.

III. 2. 3. Can the content of mystical understanding be passed on to people with no mystical experiences?

The content of mystical understanding can be passed through education to non-mystics; however, the experience of the content is only achievable by the following the traditional disciplines of contemplation. Here are the two ways by which the content of mystical understanding can be passed on: 1. the mystic uses rigorous philosophical language in communicating the content of understanding such as Ibn Arabi, Mulla Sadra, and Haj Mulla Hadi Sabzavari (to give a few examples from the Islamic mystical tradition) who have formulated their mystical intuition of reality by invoking philosophical concepts.⁶⁴ 2. The mystic opts to employ a metaphorical language in expressing the content of understanding as we see in the case of Mahmoud Shabistari (1250-1320) who compiled one of the greatest masterpieces of Persian Sufi poetry *Golshane Raz* (*The Secret Rose Garden*) in 993 couplets for the poetic expression of his mystical intuitions of reality.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Izutsu, *The Concept and Reality of Existence*, pp. 68-75.

⁶⁵ Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 93.

III. 2. 4. Should atheists accept the epistemic reliability of mystical understanding?

This question is revolving around the possibility of skepticism with regards to mystical understanding. The truth of the content of mystical understanding might be easily confirmed by those holding a religious worldview, because such an understanding conversely confirms their worldview. However, atheists who hold a different worldview would ask for reasons that can be considered convincing within their own apparatus of compelling arguments. If such an argument is not provided, for an atheist there won't be any motivation to think that the content of mystical understanding is firstly distinct from hallucination and deception, and secondly that content is transmittable as a plausible argument for the existence of a transcendent Being as the source of the rest of the world of existence.

In what follows, three strategies for the epistemic reliability of mystical understanding will be examined:

1. The Criterion of Rationality

The content of mystical understanding should not go against the clear judgements of reason. According to this criterion, it is not necessary for the content of mystical understanding to be rationally demonstrable, rather it is sufficient for it to escape rational reasoning but at the same time not contradict it. Otherwise expressed, the content should not result in contradiction; therefore, if an argument is successfully put forward that what a mystic deems to be understanding is actually a contradictory view, then the credibility of such an understanding is seriously questioned.

However, some of the mystics have argued that mystical experiences belong to the domain where the mind is absolutely absent, and since the mind does not function in that domain, one

cannot speak of logical rules in that area. Therefore, the law of excluded middle or the law of non-contradiction do not have any referent in that domain; hence reason cannot be a criterion of judgment about the content of mystical experiences.⁶⁶ This idea seems to hold a one-dimensional view of reason which only allows for reason to deal with concepts; furthermore, it contends that mystical experience is in principle fundamentally disconnected from reason. However, based on Nasr's account which I have tried to explain, reason is subject to gradation and modulation; what unites reason in the conceptual level with reason in the meta-conceptual level is their cognitive relation with their objects, in the former case reason is directed towards knowing its object and in the latter case reason is directed towards understanding its object. The difference between the two is accounted for in terms of intensity and weakness, where when reason knows its object, the act of knowing is mediated through concepts, but when reason understands its object, the act of understanding is facilitated by the absence of concepts and through the presence of the object of understanding before the illuminated reason.

Furthermore, the account of mystical experience which builds an insulating wall between reason and what occurs to a mystic in the state of grasping the unity, renders the meaningful translation of the content of mystic's experience into the language of discursive philosophy impossible. What would be counted as a mystical experience according to this view is the experience which has an ineffable and mysterious content and therefore merely accessible to the mystic himself. However, the mystical understanding introduced here escapes being an instant of such an account of mystical experience, but rather is the act of reason in embracing reality without any intermediary auxiliary tool such as concepts being involved. Since this act of reason is realized at the stage where reason gains more strength in encompassing reality compared to the

⁶⁶ Malakian, *Ravesh Shinasiye Motale'at Moqayesayiye Irfan*, p. 83.

level where it is dependent on auxiliary tools such as concepts, what is understood occupies a wider domain than what can be captured by concepts and propositions; but the mere fact of being beyond the capacity of concepts and propositions does not imply that this kind of understanding is not approachable in terms of concepts and propositions. Although the content of mystical understanding as witnessed in the state of mystical intuition cannot exactly be represented in the form of language; however, that content can be mirrored by language through the prism of metaphor. When the content comes down to the level of language, words become metaphorical signs alluding to the content which is unseen with regards to them, but witnessed by the subject of the act of understanding, i.e., the mystic.

However, pure philosophical concepts can also be employed to convey the content of mystical understanding. An interesting example for philosophical translation of mystical understanding is Haji Mulla Hadi Sabzavari's philosophical expression of his mystical intuition of the unity of existence.⁶⁷ Some have argued that in mystical experiences reason does not disappear, but rather the mystic is still working with concepts, therefore he is subject to the laws of logic.⁶⁸ However, this view clearly takes the content of all mystical experiences to be propositional and from the category of acquisitional knowledge. I have tried to argue in favor of the idea which sees abandoning concepts (at least at the level of experiencing the unity) as a necessary condition for the realization of understanding reality.

Therefore, if all mystical experiences were to be the result of the function of reason in the domain of concepts, the credibility of presential knowledge which as Nasr has argued is the cornerstone of the mystic's unitary vision of reality, will fall down. However, as argued before,

⁶⁷ Izutsu, *The Concept and Reality of Existence*, pp. 25-33.

⁶⁸ Malakian, p. 83.

presential knowledge is not just a kind of knowledge, but rather the ultimate form of knowledge where certainty is immediately achieved once the knower witnesses or understands the known. Therefore, presential knowledge is seen as the bedrock of the human epistemic system upon which acquisitional knowledge ultimately rely. Thus, mystical understanding cannot be an instance of acquisitional knowledge.

2. The criterion of common properties

According to this criterion, if the content of the intuitions of multiple mystics belonging to different traditions share common properties, then it would imply that their understandings represent the reality. Therefore, the question which needs to be put forward is whether there are common properties among the contents of mystical understandings that would allow a non-mystic to reconstruct a unified structure based on those points of similarity, or each of the mystical intuitions of reality has its own exclusive properties, without their being any possibility of transmutation between one intuition and the other.

For example, Abul is sitting in his room, and during the midnight he hears the door of his house being knocked. He asks his wife and his two daughters who are sitting in the hall: “did you also hear our door being knocked?”, if their answer is positive, he would go towards the door to figure out who is knocking the door. But if their answer is negative, he would think perhaps he is wrong in hearing the knocking sound. However, admitting that he is wrong does not mean that he hasn’t heard any sound; he might have heard a sound, but her wife and daughters’ replies give him assurance that the experience of hearing the knocking sound does not correspond to reality. What is the difference between the instance where Abul’s hearing the sound is confirmed by his wife and daughters auditory experience of hearing the same sound and the opposite instance where they altogether say that they haven’t heard any sound? The difference lies in the fact that the mental-

psychological structure of the human mind does not accept that a substantial amount of reasonable people would come together and have consensus on an experience which does not represent reality; however, the number of reasonable people might differ from case to case, as in our example three testimonies are enough while other cases might require more numbers.

Therefore, it seems that consensus over experiences is a sign of some sort of truth in what is agreed upon; the human mind and psyche is naturally inclined to accept that consensus over experiences has a share in representing or mirroring reality. The same is true of mystical experiences. If the experience is very personal and idiosyncratic, there is a high chance of deception being involved; however, if the experience is shared by a considerable number of mystics belonging to different traditions, then a plausible case can be made for the credibility of the experience.

Similarly, as Nasr has eloquently elaborated⁶⁹ when the master of Hindu gnosis Sankara's knowledge of Brahma, the supreme illuminative experience of the Buddha, Zoroaster and Mani's concern with the sacred knowledge, the Kabbalists and Hasidic mystics' elaboration on the attainment of *hokmah* (wisdom), the Sufi's experience of reaching *al-ma'rifah* (the highest form of knowledge), saint Paul's emphasis on the divine wisdom, Clement of Alexandria's view on the ultimate sacred character of knowledge, Origen's idea of the illumination of intelligence by the Logos, Saint Augustine's thought of the innate power of the intellect in receiving divine illumination, Meister Eckhart's insistence on the power of the soul in accessing "the spark" through which God becomes known, Nicholas of Cusa's conviction with regards to the idea that "Divine Wisdom" is only attained if a human prepares the ground to experience and taste it, Jacob

⁶⁹ Nasr, *knowledge and the Sacred*, pp. 10-24.

Boehme's claim in having been illuminated by the "Divine Sophia" as an inner mode of revelation, are ultimately based on an immediate mystical experience of reality, and that mystical experience has a content the essence of which is shared by all these different mystics, it seems clearly plausible to hold that the experiences of all these mystics are in a representational relation with reality. Although the expression of that very experience has a distinct character in terms of its formulation; however, once the level of the formal articulation is transcended, there appears to be transcendental unity lying beyond.

It should be noted that the claim with regards to the criterion of common properties is not that the shared properties of mystical experience bring about logical certainty concerning the content of the experience, but it is to argue that the common features of the experience create some sort of psychological assurance about its content representing reality.

3. The Criterion of Method

Being methodic can also be another sign that the content of mystical experience is representing reality. Imagine I am telling you if you walk between 12 and 2 a.m. alongside the Donau river, you will see a gigantic monster appearing itself, shouting at you and then taking its way and disappearing. If you ask: "what makes seeing the monster possible for me?", and I reply: "I don't know, some people see and some don't, but I have seen", nobody would take me seriously. However, if my friend Abul claims that in case five conditions of taking shower, not having dinner, walking with bare feet, reciting a mantra, and not scratching the back of your ears if it is itching are fulfilled, you will definitely see the monster; and then you and your friend after following the instructions see the monster, it will be plausible to accept the existence of the monster, because the experience has been methodic.

Similarly, when mystics claim that through following the injunctions of traditional disciplines of contemplation, one can reach a stage where the dependence of the whole world on the Absolute is witnessed, they are introducing applicable practical teachings. A person who claims that following those practical teachings is not knowledge conducive, but is rather deceptive, should make the same claim concerning the methods of experimental sciences in order to remain consistent. In both cases, the rejection of the output of experience as something representing reality needs to be based on proving the falsity of their methods, and the way to invalidate their methods is through the practical application of them and as a result observing that they don't work.

Therefore, with regards to the criterion of method, the case of mystical experience is similar to the experimental sciences. To illustrate this point with an example, if one asks: "on what basis are you claiming that z is the result of the mixture of x and y?", and you answer: "if you create a, b, and c conditions in a laboratory, you will get that result". This means that if certain premises are provided, the conclusion will be given; hence, being methodic is a criterion of objectivity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I will provide a summary of the ideas discussed in each chapter.

In Chapter I, I discussed Nasr's account of mystical knowledge, the historical context of his discussion, the key terms involved in his theory, and its metaphysical foundations. In Nasr's critique of Descartes regarding double-reductionism which according to him does not allow for the emergence of a multi-layered view of the subjective and objective reality, I have suggested that his interpretation is controversial and unconvincing. However, for him the critique sets the stage for advocacy of a more integrated approach to knowledge, drawing from Eastern mystical traditions. I further elaborated on the role played by his view of intellect and revelation in his account of mystical knowledge, the former elements being necessary conditions for the emergence of the latter. I then introduced a tentative argument for his view of correspondence between the different levels of subjective and objective reality; the idea that each level of consciousness aligns with its proper object of knowledge in the external world. Finally, I examined his main thesis about how self-awareness leads to knowing the Ultimate Self and brings about mystical knowledge, which is witnessing the total dependence of the world on God.

In Chapter II, I have analyzed Zagzebski's account of understanding, its constituting features, and how she deals with the problem of skepticism regarding understanding. I have explained in detail what Zagzebski means by grasping the structure. I further commented on the features of understanding; that it is techne-dependent, that it is directed at a totality rather than discrete objects, that it is mainly non-propositional, like moral virtues it is property of its bearers, and it contains simplification. Finally, I examined the two criteria Zagzebski introduces to block the emergence

of skepticism: conscious transparency and internal accessibility. However, I have suggested that there is a problem for the two criteria; they heavily rely on the individual's subjective experience, therefore it can fall subject to self-deception and fallibility.

In chapter III, I drew a comparison between Nasr's view of mystical knowledge and Zagzebski's account of understanding. I identified four major common points that makes the translation of Nasr's view into Zagzebski's possible. I explained how the multi-layered-ness of reality, non-propositionality, *techne*/ traditional science of the soul, and the idea of grasping totality renders the translation possible. I furthermore introduced a provisional account of mystical understanding, with suggestions on how it can block a problem of skepticism that may arise for it.

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