

Studying Concepts from an Epistemological Perspective

CONCEPTS CAN BE viewed from various angles and subjected to a variety of approaches. They can be studied linguistically, psychologically, philosophically, or epistemologically. In the latter case, the structures of concepts are subjected to an analysis which clarifies how relationships among concepts are formed to create integrated epistemological fields.

In this chapter we will be discussing the problem of meaning, that is, the changes that occur in a concept and its signification. In the course of this discussion we will touch upon the epistemological necessity of concepts, concept structure analysis, changes in concepts, networks of key concepts, and the method of categorizing epistemological concepts in the Qur'an. The discussion will take place on three levels of meaning: (1) lexical (*al-dilālah al-mu'jamiyyah*), (2) practical (*al-dilālah al-isti'māliyyah*), and (3) interpretative (*al-dilālah al-ta'wīliyyah*).

FIRST: THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL NECESSITY OF CONCEPTS

Any cultural system will be made up of a set of integrated epistemological fields. Such fields include, for example, the realms of religion, metaphysics, mathematics, logic, language and linguistics, society and sociology, and so on. Each of these epistemological fields in turn consists of a set of concepts that are related to each other in specific ways.

1) *The value of concepts*

Each epistemological field is set apart from others by particular features and concepts, while various epistemological fields are linked together to form an integrated epistemological system. The analysis of

an epistemological structure is based on three foundations: (1) concepts, (2) the relationships that join concepts into a semantic field, and (3) the relationships that join differing semantic fields into a larger epistemological system. Concepts are a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the presence of an epistemological field. It is concepts that highlight the features of a given field; however, the vagueness or distortion of ideas and concepts has caused many writers to conflate or confuse different meanings. Hence, thinkers should make sure to clarify the overall concepts that make up a given field or system.

2) *Concepts in the logical sense*

A concept is a set of specific characteristics and features that distinguish one entity from another. In the context of this discussion, however, we will be adopting the view that the vast majority of concepts are marked by unlimited flexibility. Hence, their meanings broaden at some times and narrow at others, while at the same time preserving their own semantic field. Concepts are to be viewed as a type of universal or abstraction, salient examples of which include: freedom and tyranny, justice and injustice, truth and falsehood, good and evil, beauty and ugliness.

3) *Concept formation*

A concept embodies a meaning or set of meanings which we express by means of either a single word, such as “knowledge,” or an expression such as, “divine knowledge.” When a particular word is used to communicate a particular meaning, the result is a term which is agreed upon by specialists in a particular field. Such a term may continue to be used exclusively by those who have agreed upon it. However, a problem arises when a particular word comes to be used to communicate several different meanings without the aid of linguistic contexts that make it possible to distinguish which particular meaning of the word is intended. This situation differs from that in which a single word is used to convey two or more different meanings but in which we can deduce which meaning of the word is intended based on the linguistic context.

This difficulty does not arise in relation to concepts with clearly specified meanings. An example of such a situation involves the concept

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of “democracy,” whose lexical definition – ‘the rule of the people’ – is agreed upon, but whose meaning in actual usage is the subject of debate.

When the order of concepts is disturbed, relationships among members of the Muslim community are affected such that their ties based on doctrine become secondary rather than primary. This sort of reordering might take place due to influences from atheistic and existentialist philosophies which place the individual front and center, and that may even go so far as to make the individual the source of legislation and the measure of what is good and bad, true and false.

SECOND: CONCEPT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

In order to define a concept, we need to deconstruct its elements and identify their hierarchical arrangement.

1) *Identifying a concept's structure*

A concept's structure consists of numerous elements, some of which are fundamental and others of which are complementary. The fundamental elements enjoy logical priority in the structure, given that they are not derived from anything else. In this respect they resemble the axioms in mathematical and logical systems. Semanticists draw a distinction between basic meanings and additional meanings. The basic meaning performs the most important function of language, which is communication and the transfer of ideas. Therefore, the precise understanding of a concept requires us to analyze its structure and identify its component elements.

2) *The importance of concept structure analysis*

To illustrate the importance of the analytical process for a precise and correct understanding of concepts, let us take as an example the concept of *al-ʿaql*, translated generally as “mind” or “reason.” Concepts may be divided into three different types: (1) epistemological concepts such as knowledge (*ʿilm*), understanding (*fahm*), thought (*tafakkur*) and realization or perception (*idrāk*); (2) volitional concepts such as determination (*ʿazm*), choice (*ikhtiyār*), intention (*qaṣd*), and will

(*irādah*); and (3) sensation- or feeling-related concepts, such as anger (*ghaḍab*), fear (*khawf*), pleasure (*ladhdhab*) and pain (*alam*). When we analyze the structure of the concept of *‘aql* in this manner, we impact the nature of the dialogue that takes place around it, as well as the way in which the dialogue proceeds and the conclusions to which it leads. Scholars have long recognized that there is a link between the structure of language, the structure of mind, and the structure of reality. Analyzing a concept’s structure enables us to see further concepts that underlie it, and which evolve over time as their content and range of application expand. It is thus important to observe the meanings acquired by concepts in specific historical phases.

In order to understand a word’s precise meaning, you will also need to understand the constellation of words that are semantically related to it. This involves studying the relationships among individual terms within a single semantic field or subfield, since a word’s meaning is the outcome of its relationships with other words. Similarly, the aim behind semantic field analysis is to compile all words that belong to a particular semantic field, identify the relationships among them, and clarify their links to the overall concept that ties them together.

THIRD: CONCEPTS AND THE PROBLEM OF MEANING

On what basis can we judge a concept to be clear, vague, or meaningless? We use speech to communicate about things such as doctrine, human affairs, literature, nature, and mathematics, among others. Consequently, the attention Arab scholars down the ages have devoted to the issue of meaning in the linguistic sciences and the philology has been with a view to avoiding what has been termed “semantic maladies” which afflict concepts in various epistemological fields. This concern can be observed particularly in the disciplines of philosophy, linguistics, and the fundamentals of jurisprudence.

1) *The issue of language as approached by linguists*

In his book, *Al-Khaṣā’iṣ*, Ibn Jinnī stated:

The Arabs have concerned themselves with the vocabulary of their language, refining it, studying words’ particular contexts, and observing

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grammatical structures and rules, whether in poetry, oratory, or the rhymed prose which they have taken such care to perpetuate and preserve. Consequently, the meanings conveyed by their language have a powerful, profound impact on their souls. The words of a language are thus the vessels that convey its meanings and the path along which its ends and purposes are revealed.

Linguists' interest in semantics has manifested itself in their study of lexicology, in compilations of Qur'anic terms that recur with differing facets of meaning (*al-naẓā'ir*), and in the study of metaphors. It should be remembered that the vocalization of the text of the Qur'an was an exercise in semantics. Indeed, the science of grammar and syntax arose in part due to the fact that when reading *Sūrah al-Tawbah*, 9:3, a certain Qur'an reciter had mispronounced the phrase *rasūluhu* ("His Apostle" in the nominative case) as *rasūlihi* ("His Apostle" in the genitive case), which drastically changed the meaning of the verse from "God disavows all who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him, and [so does] His Apostle (*wa rasūluhu*)," to "God disavows all who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him, and [He likewise disavows] His Apostle (*wa rasūlihi*)."

2) The issue of meaning as approached by rhetoricians

Rhetoricians have taken a special interest in the semantic aspects of language, such as literal meaning vs. metaphor, sentence structure, and the study of linguistic modes, such as the imperative mode (commands and prohibitions), the interrogative mode (questions), exclamations and others. Al-Jurjānī (d. 474 AH/1078 CE), for example, proposed the notion of *al-naẓm* (meaning order, arrangement, poetic verse), which he developed into a sophisticated literary theory. According to al-Jurjānī:

The term *al-naẓm* refers to the process of ordering speech in the manner required by the rules of grammar and syntax, and of familiarizing yourself with and adhering to prevailing linguistic norms.

3) The issue of meaning as approached by philosophers

The issue of words and meaning has been investigated by a number of

Muslim philosophers, including al-Kindī (259 AH/873 CE), al-Fārābī (339 AH/951 CE), Ibn Sīnā, or Avicenna (428 AH/1037 CE), Ibn Rushd, or Averroes (594 AH/1198 CE), Ibn Ḥazm (456 AH/1064 CE), and al-Ghazālī (504 AH/1111 CE), most of whose treatises on logic and language addressed this topic. Most of these scholars held that words indicate meaning in three different ways, which came to be known as: (1) correspondence (*dilālat al-muṭābaqah*), (2) inclusion (*dilālat al-taḍmīn*), and (3) association (*dilālat al-iltizām*), the last of which refers to the way in which a word or expression points to something beyond what has been named. According to al-Ghazālī:

Based on the manner in which they are related to meanings, words may be divided into four categories: (1) homonyms (*al-mushtarakah*), (2) generic nouns (*al-mutawāṭi'ah*), (3) synonyms (*al-mutarādifah*) and (4) dissimilar terms (*al-mutazāyilah*). The first type, the homonym, is a single word which is used to refer to several different entities with distinct definitions. The second type, the generic noun, includes a whole group or class and, as such, refers to several different entities that share a feature, or features, in common. The third type, the synonym (*al-mutarādifah*), is a set of different words that refer to the same entity and share the same definition. And the fourth and last type, dissimilar terms (*al-mutazāyilah*), applies to words which have none of these features in common.

4) *The issue of meaning as addressed by scholars of the fundamentals of jurisprudence*

Scholars of the fundamentals of Islamic jurisprudence have concerned themselves with both language and meaning due to the intimate link that exists between the understanding of language and the understanding of the Divine Law revealed in the Arabic tongue.

The science of the fundamentals of jurisprudence aims to deduce legal rulings from specific texts, a process that requires an understanding of the words of the texts from which the rulings are being deduced. Legal scholars divide words into four categories – synonyms (*mutarādifah*), homonyms (*mushtarakah*), unrestricted (*muṭlaqah*) and restricted (*muqayyadah*). Such scholars take a clear interest, of course, in commands and prohibitions given the fact that it is commands and prohibitions which constitute the focal point of all speech addressed to morally responsible agents.

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They also concern themselves with context, which determines the meanings of the legal categories into which actions are classified, such as permissibility (*al-ibāḥah*), obligation (*wujūb*), impossibility (*ta'jīz*),¹ and advisement (*irshād*),² which are based on the Qur'an's consideration for meaning and structure.

FOURTH: CHANGE IN CONCEPTS

Concepts are embedded in specific environmental and cultural frameworks. Hence, the general, everyday use of terms associated with philosophy, science and literature can cause confusion because, rather than being mere signs pointing to an external reality, the words and expressions we use become bound to a certain mental conceptualization. We should thus be aware of certain words' association with the epistemological content of philosophy and the system of thought to which it gave rise. At the same time, we should take care to distinguish between the phenomenon of conceptual change, and that of conceptual distortion.

1) *Reasons for conceptual change*

Cultural concepts change due to a variety of causes, including the emergence of new needs and psychological and social factors such as bans and taboos. For although the concepts we express through words are abstractions, they are nevertheless shaped by concrete situations.

2) *Conceptual distortion*

The process of semantic change is a natural one. The meaning of a word may pass through various stages of evolution. At each stage, the modification in the concept will then meet with acceptance by speakers of the language concerned, including their academic institutions. However, this process is to be distinguished from semantic distortion, which occurs when the significance a word develops over time is inconsistent with its original meaning.

An example of this phenomenon may be seen in relation to the concept of the mind, or reason (*ʿaql*). At one stage, methods of researching the mind consisted in demonstrating the way in which mind had

emerged out of matter. The conclusion that some researchers drew from this was that the mind is nothing but a physical organ. However, this materialistic theory of mind was eventually demolished based on irrefutable scientific evidence.

Materialistic trends in science and philosophy distorted the concept of ‘mind’ or ‘reason’ based on their exclusive focus on physical function. The fallacy of materialism lies in confusing the part with the whole, that is, in concluding that because the mind functions via matter, the mind itself consists of matter and nothing more. The Islamic conception of knowledge, by contrast, holds that the human mind is a spiritual entity created by God Almighty in association with the body.

3) Steps to be followed in the treatments of concepts

There are specific steps which need to be followed if we are to approach concepts in a proper and precise manner. The first step is to acknowledge the distinguishing features of the language and cultural context in which a concept has been formulated. The second step is to determine whatever lexical and technical meanings are associated with the terms in which the concept is expressed. The third is to identify the semantic process through which the concept has passed by distinguishing between the meanings with which it was linked upon its initial formulation, and the meanings which it has acquired during its historical evolution. And the fourth is to analyze the concept’s semantic structure, which involves the identification of its fundamental and complementary elements. This process will help us to distinguish between a concept’s natural semantic evolution and its distortion, be it in the form of narrowing, broadening, or whatever else.

FIFTH: THE NETWORK OF KEY CONCEPTS IN THE QUR’AN

Given that for Muslims, the Qur’an is the primary source of knowledge, it will be necessary to enumerate the Qur’anic terms which describe the act of knowing, the means by which knowledge is acquired, and the value of knowledge. We must then translate these terms into concepts. Some Qur’anic terms have clearly defined, relatively self-contained meanings, while others are bound up with

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additional terms that relate to a given concept. Some terms occur frequently in the Qur'an, and others only rarely. Consequently, we have organized them into thematic groups. Under the category of 'mind', for example, we list all terms having to do with mental processes, such as thought (*tafakkur*), reflection (*tadabbur*), investigation (*naẓar*), hearing (*sam'*) and sight (*baṣar*), while under the concept of revelation we list terms connected with prophecy (*nubuwwah*), 'the book' (*al-kitāb*), and 'the message' (*al-risālah*).

SIXTH: THE METHOD OF CLASSIFYING EPISTEMOLOGICAL TERMS IN THE QUR'AN

There is a set of Qur'anic terms whose meanings are bound to the concepts of *ilm* and *ma'rifah*, and which have been derived through a reading of Qur'anic commentaries.

The meanings of such terms may be classified into three types: (1) lexical, (2) practical, and (3) interpretative.

1) *Lexical meaning (al-dalālah al-mu'jamiyyah)*

The term "lexical meaning" is used to refer to what scholars of the fundamentals of jurisprudence have judged to be a word's original denotation. The original denotation of a term can only be modified based on valid evidence. A term's lexical meaning is based on its relative placement in a semantic field vis-à-vis other related words. Relationships among these different terms needs to be clarified due to the existence of homonyms, synonyms, and antonyms, as well as subtle distinctions among terms. A lexical definition embodies the mental conceptualization that is triggered by the term being defined outside its usual context of social customs and religious beliefs. Apart from a more specific context, however, a word bears numerous possible interpretations. Hence, the linguistic content that precedes and follows a term is the most important factor for determining its meaning and the semantic field to which it belongs.

2) *Practical signification (al-dalālah al-isti'māliyyah)*

The term "practical signification" refers to the meaning that a word

conveys in actual use or to its metaphorical meanings in a particular context, since individual words are only used to convey their meanings in conjunction with other words. In order to understand particular words in the Qur'an, we need to ascertain what meaning the word in question conveyed during the time when the Qur'an was revealed. There are words which took on precise, heretofore unfamiliar meanings and features based on the way in which they were used in their Qur'anic context or in the overall religious milieu.

3) *Interpretative signification (al-dalālah al-ta'wīliyyah)*

Interpretation (*ta'wīl*) is a means of determining what a speaker intended to say by the words he or she uttered or wrote. However, this aim cannot be attained without adhering to the rules of the language being used. Hence, if one claims that the meaning of something someone has said or written is different from what it appears to be on the surface, one must back up this claim with evidence. Otherwise, we may lose confidence in language and its ability to perform its communicative function. Interpretation involves affirming that a word or set of words conveys a metaphorical rather than a literal meaning. Such an affirmation, in turn, involves understanding the word or words within their surrounding context, and if the affirmation is well-founded, it enables us to arrive at a sounder grasp of the truth being conveyed by the words.

Well-founded interpretation requires that we study the way words were or are actually used in their respective contexts; it requires that we appreciate the link between literal meaning and metaphor, that we be on the lookout for the use of homonyms, and that we be well-versed in scholastic theological thought given the way it has shaped the evolution of certain words' meanings. Al-Shāṭibī stipulated that in order for the interpretation of a word in the Qur'an to be correct, it must be consistent with the word's original lexical meaning, with the meaning it bore in commonly accepted usage at the time the Qur'an was revealed, with its legal definition, and with its metaphorical sense. It must also be consistent with the rules and structure of the language, the semantic context, and what we know about what occasioned the revelation of the verse in question.