Illuminating Modern Western Skepticism

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Abstract

The goal of this article is to explain how the concept of *Illumination* came to be a source of skepticism in the modern West. In ancient and medieval Christian thought it was essentially tied not only to Plato's philosophy, but especially to Augustine's invention of the notion that the soul is an inner chamber containing all his knowledge, but also the locus of his encounter with God. The concept of the soul or mind as an inner chamber re-emerged in early modern western philosophy, but it was no longer open to illumination, John Locke having made revelation into an entirely distinct category of knowledge. The set of ocular metaphors of which illumination is a part still has an important place in ordinary language, but can no longer provide for a philosophical theory of knowledge. Thus, different complex metaphors need to be employed. Alasdair MacIntyre's account of human reason begins with social practices, and can be described as an extensive thesis reflecting the metaphor Knowing as Doing. With his incorporation of Thomas Aquinas into his account of tradition-constituted rationality, it is suggested that interesting parallels might be found with the work of Mulla Sadra.

Keywords

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1. Introduction

It is truly an honor to be invited to write an article for the *Journal of Philosophical-Theological Research*. I have had several opportunities to speak with Iranian philosophers. I was quite impressed by the fact that they know not only their own varied Persian traditions, but often know as much or more about Ancient Greek philosophy than many English-speaking philosophers in the U.S. Many also know as much about current Anglo-American philosophy as some Anglo-Americans do. I have, unfortunately, done much less study of Persian philosophy. So, wanting to contribute an article that would be of interest to Iranian philosophers, I consulted an account of modern Persian philosophy. It begins its description of the wide variety in Iranian philosophy with a brief account of "neo-Illuminationism." It also mentions Ibn Al-'Arabi's claim that philosophical wisdom can be detected through the recurrence of "archetypal symbols such as the icon of light" (Morewedge & Leaman, 1998, Vol. 5, p. 18).

It happens that I had been invited to a conference whose central topic was the question of whether re-emphasizing the ancient concept of a mystical light could provide a remedy for current widespread skepticism in the West. I told the organizers that were I to come, my answer would be "no," and I would argue that it is in fact *because of* the set of metaphors to which illumination belongs, and especially the philosophical discussion that has followed from it in the modern West, that anyone could reasonably wonder *whether* there can be any knowledge at all. Thus, I decided that my understanding of the negative role of the *metaphor* of illumination in the West would provide an interesting topic for contemporary Persian philosophers who see a positive role for illumination and the *icon* of light.

To sketch how the epistemology of illumination led to skepticism I begin with recent work by Phillip Cary in his book *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self*. He traces the notion of the inner self from Augustine of Hippo's "roomy chambers of memory" to John Locke's *camera oscura* (Cary, 2000).

I argue that current forms of skepticism, often represented by assorted realist–antirealist debates, even in theology, are heirs of Augustine's and René Descartes's inward turn. Here I pursue the skeptical consequences of the image of the "veil of language."[1] Richard Rorty has argued along similar lines; however, he claims that the problem is with the idea of knowledge as *representation*. I agree, but argue that, in addition, it is with the image of the knower as *passive recipient* – an image tied just as firmly to the metaphor of illumination.

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1. I believe that this is Rorty's (1979) term but cannot find the reference.

I then turn to the question of whether skepticism is an *inevitable* result of the illumination metaphor. Could we *now* in the West develop a skeptic-proof epistemology of illumination? My answer, again, is "no." My approach is to examine the structure of the metaphor Knowing Is Seeing,[1] using the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson to argue that this basic metaphor is inevitably the root of a *system* of "metaphorical implications" that in one way or another have led to skepticism in the modern West (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, pp. 53–54) – if not via Descartes's inner theater then at least via late modern thinkers' passivity before the veil of language.

In the next section I attend to some possibilities for cross-fertilization in the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Lakoff and Johnson. Wittgenstein provides the model for philosophy as therapeutic treatment of misleading metaphors – in large part, therapy to cure philosophers of the now "blinding" effects of the illumination metaphor. I then present Alasdair MacIntyre's account of tradition-constituted reason as a viable practice-based alternative to epistemologies of illumination. In my final section, I write a bit about the relevance of this work for relations between philosophy in the contemporary English-speaking world and that in Iran, as represented by the followers of Mulla Sadra.

2. From Illumination to Skepticism

In this section I provide an overview of the skeptical consequences for modern philosophy of the metaphor of illumination, and then show how the illumination tradition continues to beguile many philosophers today.

The concept of illumination is based on the metaphor Knowing Is Seeing, which is found across the whole range of Indo-European languages, as far back as it is possible to trace the history (Sweetser, 1990 , p. 33). In Iran it is probably well known that many existing languages can be traced to one branch of the earliest-known written sources, called the Indo-Iranian sources. The concept of illumination is supposed by many to have originated in the Platonic tradition. Recollection is central for Plato, but recollection is only possible if it is grounded in prior knowledge, acquired by means of metaphorical seeing. Augustine endorsed the Platonic metaphor of vision, and in his *De Trinitate* (Vol. 2, p. 24) made "a certain unique kind of incorporeal light" the essential condition of our ability to know intelligible things (quoted in Cary, 2000, p. 18).

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1. I am using Lakoff and Johnson's convention of capitalizing what they see as the most significant metaphors that shape modern philosophy (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

Augustine set the stage for the later development of skepticism by tying the concept of illumination to his own invention–the concept of inner space. According to Cary, this notion arose from Augustine's reflection on the problem of the location of the soul. He came to conceive of it as a "space" of its own. The ancient rhetorical tradition had already connected the ideas of *chambers* and *memory*: orators memorized the order of subjects in a speech by imagining themselves walking through the rooms of a familiar house and mentally marking places with an image that would serve as a reminder of the next topic. The result was the introduction, in Augustine's *Confessions*, of the idea of memory as a capacious inner chamber, in which are found "innumerable images of all kinds… . whatever we think about… . all the skills acquired through the liberal arts…. the principles and laws of numbers… ." and, most important, God (*Conf.*, 10, pp. 8–12; Chadwick, 1991, pp. 185–190 *passim*).

Augustine saw the privacy of the inner self as a result of the Fall, since non-spatial things cannot be separated by distance but only by evil will and culpable ignorance. This appears in Augustine's impression of himself having been, as an infant without language, locked up inside himself (*Conf.*, Vol. 1, p. 8).

While Augustine's metaphor of the inner room seems to have played no role in philosophy until Descartes, it was central to the western spiritual tradition. When the idea re-emerged in early modern philosophy there were two changes. One is that whereas in the spiritual tradition one must choose whether to enter into oneself, for moderns the real I is never found anywhere else. Cary says:

> One of the consequences of the Western secularization of reason is that the privacy of the inner self comes to be seen not as a tragedy attendant upon the Fall, but as something essential and inevitable, as if it were the very nature of the human mind to be an inner room that no one else can enter. (Cary, 2000, p. 123)

The second change is that while Augustine's roomy chamber is actually more like a courtyard, open to the light of the Sun above, the modern version has a roof. Cary claims that Locke rather than Descartes has elaborated this image most vividly. The mind is a *camera oscura* with no openings to the world except the senses (Cary, 2000, p. 123). Locke writes: "These alone, as far as I can discover, are the windows by which light is let into this *dark room.* For, methinks, the *understanding* is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible resemblances or *ideas* of things without ..." (Locke, 1690, Vol. 2, p.11; Yolton, 1961, Vol. 1, p. 129). Cary concludes:

> Not only is each of us locked in our own separate little closet for as

long as we live, but we don't even get to look out the window! We never actually see the world outside, but only its image projected on the inner wall of our private dark room. Hence all we are really certain of is what is inside our own minds. This thought has haunted a good deal of modern philosophy, especially in English-speaking countries. (Cary, 2000, p. 123)

Philosopher Bryan Magee describes the moment when this image first struck him. In chapel he reflected on the fact that upon closing his eyes all of the other boys disappeared–that is, his visual image of them did. He says:

Up to that moment I had always taken it for granted that I was in immediate contact with the people and things outside of me … but now, suddenly, I realized that their existence was one thing and my awareness of it something radically other… . Even now after all these years, what I cannot put into words is how indescribably appalling I found that moment of insight… . as if I were for ever cut off from everything that existed – apart from myself – and as if I were trapped for life inside my own head. (Magee, 1998 , pp. 9–10)

This "anxious little person" trapped in its head (Nicholas Lash's term) has been largely exorcized–although with difficulty–from Anglo-American epistemology, beginning with Gilbert Ryle and Wittgenstein (Lash, 1986, p. 94). Today Daniel Dennett attempts to exorcize the image from the cognitive neurosciences by means of his parody of the Cartesian theater (Dennett, 1991, p. 17). Lash and Fergus Kerr find the notion to be still quite influential in theology. Kerr's work has inspired me to name an important method in philosophy: philosophical argumentation by means of pejorative re-description. Kerr's term for the Cartesian ego is "the hermit in the head" (Kerr, 1997, p. 57).

From Descartes on, it was assumed (or hoped) that ideas represented things in the world, and that language represented the ideas. Because ideas (of the modern sort) are private entities in the mind, there is no way to know whether one person's idea is the same as another's. Therefore, a movement began in the nineteenth century to leave the middle term out of the three-way relation and to focus simply on the relation between language and the world. This is called either the rejection or psychologism, or the linguistic turn.

I claim that despite the linguistic turn we nonetheless have a new version of Cartesian anxiety. The bridge between the problem of the "veil of ideas" and the problem of "the veil of language" can be traced to Kant's philosophy. For Immanuel Kant, concepts are mental entities; after the linguistic turn they are linguistic entities. Skepticism regarding the possibility of *mind-independent* reality was transformed into skepticism about *language-independent* reality, as the following passage illustrates:

The Kantian picture contributes to the epistemological predicament, for he demonstrated that there is a constructive dimension to human knowing. The mind does not simply mirror reality, but rather works reality over… . Kant could not imagine forms of logic or physics other than those of Aristotle and Newton, yet we now have to contend with alternative forms of logic, geometry, and physics. What Kant took to be universal categories of the understanding have instead turned out to be contingent and historically conditioned. The mind is not a mirror but a filter of nature. For post-Kantians, then, the predicament is that we construct the world with historically variable and culturally conditioned conceptual schemes.

The Kantian problematic amounts to the fundamental dilemma whether anything – sand in the Sahara, football games, marriages, values, God – is really there; are they "given," or is everything constructed ("graven")? … Is the world differentiated, divided up into natural kinds and natural orders, or are all these distinctions – for example between one kind of tree and another, between trees and other kinds of vegetation, … between animals and humans – products of a contingent system of projection … ? When we stake a truth claim about the world, are we talking about the world or only about ourselves, our habits of perception, or our will to dominate? The difficulty – the Kantian problematic – is that there is no way to get behind or above our language and our conceptual schemes to check whether they fit with reality. (Kirk & Vanhoozer, 1999, p. 21)

So the linguistic turn removed philosophy from the head of the individual – language is essentially communal, public – but skeptical habits die hard. The well-justified worry that ideas, understood as private entities within the mind of the individual, might not adequately represent what is out there was carried over (without justification) to skepticism about linguistic representations.

The problem with this worry is that it reverses the proper direction of fit between language and world. The commonsense (and correct) supposition is that the world and our interaction with it are given; the task is to find the best way to describe it. The realist–antirealist debates have things backwards: participants in the debate assume that we have the descriptions and the problem is whether we can know if there is anything for these to describe. The image at work is a picture of the knower looking at the world, but the world is draped or veiled by language. Language may be semi-transparent, in which case one is a critical realist; but one has to consider the possibility that language is not transparent, in which case one has no way of knowing if there is a world at all, and one is an antirealist of one sort or another.[1]

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1. Note that while the medieval debate concerned the real existence of Forms or Ideas with the

Clearly this is one of the beguiling pictures that Wittgenstein would help us to escape in showing us how language and world are internally related. Brad Kallenberg writes:

> saying that Wittgenstein conceived of language as internally related to world is to say three things. First, it is to deny the intelligibility of speaking about language as if it were externally related to the world. Second, it is to say that neither language nor world is conceivable by human beings prior to, or independently of, the other. Third, it is to say that language-users are not spectators of the world but performers in it… . (Kallenberg, 2001, p. 190)

It is true that we cannot know what the world is like apart from our human, linguistically shaped experience of it, but to say that human knowledge is not divine knowledge is not to say that it is no knowledge at all. Even less is it to call into question the existence of the world.

How can this particular form of skepticism be so gripping? ~~Richard~~ Rorty's diagnosis is that it derives from the theory of knowledge as *representation*. He writes that the central claim of philosophy since Kant has been that the "possibility of representing reality" was what needed explanation, and for this project the difference between mental and linguistic representation is relatively unimportant (Rorty, 1979, 134n4).

I have been inclined in the past to agree with Rorty because it is part and parcel of his criticism of the entire set of ocular metaphors that comes down to us from Plato – a criticism with which I am sympathetic. More recently, though, I have come to think that the problem with the ocular metaphors is not only the concept of representation but also the fact that they entail the *passivity* of the knower.[1] Consider the case of a map. Can we know (can we *ever* know, to put the question in properly dramatic form) that a map accurately represents reality? Of course we can – there are good maps and bad maps and we can tell the difference. But we can do this only by going out and using them, not by sitting inside Descartes's "stove-heated room." So pragmatists are right about there being an important role for *action* in epistemology, but one need not go all the way with pragmatism to recognize this. Wittgenstein, for example, did not. The real problem is the picture of the knower as passive receiver.

So my conclusion is that the collection of metaphors of which illumination is

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"antirealism" of nominalism, modern realist–antirealist debates concern the realities that fit our mental ideas or linguistic terms.

1. One reason for the change in my evaluation of Rorty's argument is my struggle to understand the nature of neural representation. Here we simply cannot do without the concept of representation, but the concept itself must be defined in an action-oriented manner. Donald MacKay regularly defines a representation as a conditional readiness to reckon (MacKay, 1991).

a constituent part has been the source, in one way or another, of skepticism. In the early modern period the root of the problem was the fact that metaphorical light has to shine in some metaphorical *place*, and by Descartes's and Locke's day it shown into a dark room in which the ego was imprisoned.[1] After the linguistic turn, which released us back into the world, this same set of metaphors continued to produce skepticism because so few philosophers have thought to criticize a second implication, the essential passivity of the knower.

3. Illumination without Skepticism?

The question I address now is this: If the metaphor of light brought us to modern skepticism, did it *inevitably* do so? At first glance this would appear plausible; the metaphor fostered no skepticism for Plato or Augustine. We can see that Descartes's use of it was shaped by his own particular understanding of the mind, defining its contents as whatever we are aware of, and now many philosophers see this as problematic. My tentative answer is again "no." I attempt to show that there are inevitable *metaphorical entailments* with skeptical consequences. First, we are dealing with a metaphor here: After Locke's separation of knowledge of the world from theological knowledge by means of revelation, in the modern West there is no literal place for illumination in epistemology (Locke, 1690, Vol. 4, pp. 10–11;-Yolton, 1961, Vol. 2, pp. 199). I use here Lakoff and Johnson's book *Philosophy in the Flesh*, in which they extend previous work on metaphors in two ways: one by relating it to cognitive neuroscience and the other by exploring the role of metaphors in philosophy (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).[2]

Lakoff and Johnson distinguish between primary and complex metaphors. An instance of a primary metaphor is Knowing Is Seeing (Lakoff & Johnston, 1999, pp. 53–54). Primary metaphors can be combined with others and with commonsense knowledge to construct complex metaphors. Using the works of cognitive scientists, linguists, and neuroscientists, they offer a plausible hypothesis about the formation of primary metaphors, which are acquired automatically and unconsciously during childhood. For young children, subjective experiences and judgments are regularly conflated with

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1. Note that Locke's entire noetic structure is different from Descartes's: while he kept Descartes's enclosed mental chamber, he only allowed for knowledge there from the senses. Locke recognizes revelation, but only as contained in the book of the New Testament, so theological knowledge is a separate structure, but again with no "place" for illumination.

2. Much of what follows on the complementarity of Lakoff and Johnson's work with that of Wittgenstein is a development of material in my (2003). I and W. S. Brown have developed this topic further in our (2007), ch. 4.

sensorimotor experiences. For example, the experience of affection is typically correlated with the sensory experience of warmth; coming to know something is regularly associated with seeing, as in "Let's see what's in the box." During the period of conflation, associations are automatically built up between the two domains: affection and warmth; knowing and seeing (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, ch. 1).

Later, children are able to differentiate the domains but the associations persist because they are realized neurobiologically. Each cluster of memories is realized by means of the formation of a neural network. Simultaneous activation of two neural networks results in permanent neural connections, such that future activation of one automatically activates the other. Lakoff & Johnson present 25 examples of primary metaphors, along with the sensorimotor experiences ("source domains") hypothesized to give rise to them. For example, Categories Are Containers derives from the frequent observation that things that go together tend to be in the same bounded region (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, ch. 4).

Primary metaphors are like atoms in that they combine with commonplace knowledge to create complex metaphors. To see how, consider Descartes's development of Knowing Is Seeing. He conceived of the mind according to the metaphor of Mind As A Container. More precisely, he conceived of it as an inner theater with a stage upon which metaphorical objects (ideas) are illuminated by an inner light (the "Natural Light of Reason") and are observed by a metaphorical spectator. Mental attention is visual focusing. Descartes's peculiar (and false) conclusion that ideas that could be conceived "clearly and distinctly" were therefore immune from doubt follows from the structure of the complex metaphor. In the source domain of literal seeing, we are in fact unable to doubt what we clearly and distinctly perceive.

Lakoff and Johnson argue that, as embodied creatures, it stands to reason that our primary conceptual resources should come from sensorimotor experiences. The brain tends *not* to develop unneeded neural structures so if it is possible to reason using structures developed for coping with sensorimotor experiences, then it is likely that we do so (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 39). This suggests that much of our thinking is unconsciously structured by inference based on source domains of metaphorically based concepts. Although Descartes provided problematic arguments for the indubitability of ideas perceived clearly and distinctly (e.g., Descartes, 1637, p. 4; tr. and intro. Clarke, 1999, pp. 25–28) he must have already have been convinced of it because of the connection in the source domain between literally seeing clearly and being unable to doubt what is before one's eyes. This is metaphorical implication. It provides the structure for much thinking in everyday life; it is unconscious *and inevitable*.

Descartes's construction of a theory of knowledge by elaborating a complex metaphor illustrates Lakoff and Johnson's thesis regarding the typical role of metaphor in *philosophy*; essential philosophical concepts have very little literal content and the literal content is fleshed out by the structure of complex metaphors and metaphorical implication. For example, the only literal content in our concept of time has to do with relations among events. Our ability to reason about things temporal depends on metaphors such as the Spatial Orientation metaphor, according to which the observer is "located" in the present, the future is "ahead" and the past "behind," and the Moving Time metaphor in which the observer is stationary and time "passes."

They set out in one volume to enlighten both cognitive scientists and philosophers on the basis of linguistics. Their message to philosophers is this: You will inevitably develop your theories by employing the metaphors available in your culture. However, there will generally be a variety of metaphors available for any philosophical topic. Philosophy goes wrong, first, when it fails to notice that metaphors are just that – metaphors – and, second, when it relies on only one metaphorical system as the basis for theorizing. I add a message for theologians: Much of theology is already recognized to involve the extension of metaphors, since we have no literal language that is not based on what we know of earthly things in this aeon. So, for example, there may be no point in attempting to answer questions about God's relation to time, or the substance of resurrected bodies.

4. Therapy for Misleading Metaphors

If ocular metaphors cannot be avoided in ordinary language, and if I am correct that the passivity and isolation from the real world entailed by these metaphors is at the root of modern and contemporary skepticism (that is, when we want to take a good look at something we stop moving and stop what we are doing), then what are we to do? Lakoff and Johnson's recommendation is to seek alternative metaphors to exploit for epistemological purposes. Cary mentions that for the Hebrews, knowing was more often associated with hearing than with seeing (Cary 2000, 47). Lakoff and Johnson note that we have a primary metaphor, Understanding Is Grasping, but it has been little used by philosophers. So one strategy is to see what can be done with other metaphors. In addition, we need philosophical therapy in the manner of Wittgenstein's work to cure beguilement by misleading pictures. So in this section I first make comments on how the works of Wittgenstein and Lakoff and Johnson complement one another. I end with a resource in contemporary philosophy that provides a theory of knowledge based on the metaphor Knowing Is Doing.

Wittgenstein's name does not appear in the index of *Philosophy in the Flesh*, yet when reading, it I was struck by the value of each to the other. I begin with the value of Lakoff and Johnson for better understanding Wittgenstein's work: Wittgenstein is often read as a relativist because he claims that justification depends on language games and language games depend on forms of life. The appearance of relativism comes from imagining forms of life to be arbitrary and highly variable. Wittgenstein tried to evade this conclusion by claiming that forms of life and language arise from bodily experiences. Unfortunately his most prominent illustration is linguistic expressions of pain substituting for pain behavior (Wittgenstein, 1953, §2, p. 44). Pain and its expression are universal enough, but it is difficult to imagine much of the rest of language functioning on analogy to "ouch, that hurts!"

Yet there is something right about his insight that forms of life and language games are *not* arbitrary. Lakoff and Johnson show how the non-arbitrariness of language games derives from the commonalities we share in virtue of our embodied selfhood. Compare Wittgenstein's notion of the *grammar* of our concepts with Lakoff and Johnson's notion of *metaphorical implication.* In "The Blue Book" Wittgenstein asks us to consider the question "what is time?" We ask for a definition, he says, in order to clear up the *grammar* of a word:

> the puzzlement about the grammar of the word "time" arises from what one might call apparent contradictions in that grammar.
> It was such a "contradiction" which puzzled St. Augustine when he argued: How is it possible that one should measure time? For the past can't be measured, as it has gone by; and the future can't be measured because it has not yet come. And the present can't be measured because it has no extension (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 26).

In other words, puzzlement arises from attempting to imagine how to apply measurement techniques as we would use for the length of an object "to a distance on a travelling band." Here, precisely, is an instance of the metaphor of Moving Time.

To illustrate the extent to which metaphors provide *cross-cultural* language games, Lakoff and Johnson consider concepts of self in the West and in Japan. The metaphoric system used for describing our inner lives is based on a fundamental distinction between what they call the Subject and one or more Selves. The Subject is the locus of consciousness, reason, and will. The Selves consist of everything else about us. They hypothesize that the subject–self opposition arises from a variety of experiences, such as attempting and sometimes failing to control our bodies, and cases where conscious values conflict with our behavior. The metaphors that arise are cross-cultural. For example, there is the Essential Self metaphor such that there is a *real* self, hidden inside an outer self as in "you've never seen what he's really like on the

inside." In Japan one would say "He rarely puts out [his] real self," or "He always wears a mask in public." They conclude that "the multifarious notions of subject and self are far from arbitrary" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, pp. 266–68).

So Lakoff and Johnson's account of the rootedness of the metaphorical entailments or *grammar* of concepts in bodily experience provides rich resources for supporting and elaborating Wittgenstein's insights into the non-arbitrary nature of language games. Particularly interesting for my purposes here is that their central example of cross-cultural agreement in metaphorization relates to the hiddenness of the self, since this was a manner of thinking in philosophy that Wittgenstein was at pains to criticize. He expresses his view succinctly in *Philosophical Investigations*: "If one sees the behavior of a living thing, one sees its soul" (Wittgenstein, 1953, §357). Kerr summarizes as follows:

> In hundreds of such remarks Wittgenstein brings out the power of the picture of the hidden thoughts behind the facade of my face, and the invisible soul inside the carapace of my body… . Again and again … we return to the paradigm of the material object, deny its materiality, visibility and so on, and think that we have found our true selves (Kerr, 1997, p. 100).

So Wittgenstein and Lakoff and Johnson agree that ordinary language is largely fixed by embodied life in the physical world, and this ordinary language is entirely in order. Problems arise when philosophers use pictures (for Wittgenstein) or metaphors (for Lakoff & Johnson) to construct general philosophical theories. Wittgenstein shows us by a painstaking process where and how pictures/metaphors mislead us, and trains us not to say the misleading things we are tempted to say. Nonetheless, the quotation above from Kirk and Vanhoozer shows that many western philosophers still need Wittgensteinian therapy to be cured of the blinding effects of the illumination metaphor.

5. Grasping a Better Theory of Knowledge

The question for this section is whether there are resources for epistemology that do not suffer from beguilement by ocular metaphors. I present an account here that makes good use of the metaphor Knowing as Doing. The most sophisticated account of human reason in the West today, I would argue, is Alasdair MacIntyre's, largely developed in what is called his trilogy: *After Virtue* ([1981] 1984); *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988); and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990).

In *After Virtue* one goal was to explain the interminability of major moral arguments in contemporary Western society (such as those regarding

abortion, the nature of social justice, and the justification of warfare). His conclusion was that the Enlightenment attempt to produce a moral system based solely on universal human reason to replace discredited traditional forms of morality (tied to theology) failed, because (at least) three irreconcilable systems were proposed: social contract theory, Kant's deontological theory, and utilitarianism. Each of these can be used to argue one or the other side of major moral questions.

His second goal was to rehabilitate the ancient and medieval tradition of virtue ethics by providing criteria for settling disputes regarding what were to be counted as virtues. For example, Christian humility would be counted a vice by Aristotle. To do so he began with a technical concept of a social practice. I believe his reason for this is that many practices are nearly universal across cultures (although part of what defines social practices is that they change over time due to clearer conceptions of their purposes). These include agriculture, architecture, education, medicine, organized sports, religious practices, and others. Each of these aims at human goods, such as adequate shelter or health; these are internal goods. (There are also external goods, such as the money made by talented athletes.) Virtues, in the first partial definition, are acquired human capacities without which the internal goods of a practice cannot be achieved.

However, a single individual can participate in only a few practices, so the second question must be how a practice fits into the good of the whole of that a person's life story. The third question, then, is what counts as a *good* life story. To answer this, one needs an account of the ultimate purpose of human life.

So, as MacIntyre uses the word, a tradition begins with an authoritative source that provides answers to life's major questions, usually a text or set of texts. One of these questions is, in fact, what is the ultimate purpose or goal (*telos*) of human life. A tradition, then, is an ongoing, *socially embodied argument* about how best to interpret and apply the authoritative texts. Large-scale traditions such as the Aristotelian or Enlightenment tradition incorporate their own accounts of truth, justification, knowledge. Their social embodiment involves institutions and social practices. In light of a tradition's account of ultimate reality, the *telos* of human life can be discerned.

The first edition of *After Virtue* (1981) was criticized for ignoring conflicts between the Aristotelian tradition and biblical theology, and for failing to give a clear enough account of how his descriptions of *historical* developments in ethics could serve to *justify* his claims. So in the second edition (1984) he added a lengthy postscript that describes the criticisms and provides a preview of his next book, *Whose Justice?*, in which he clarifies his account of tradition-constituted reasoning, and gives major attention to

Thomas Aquinas's synthesis of the Augustinian theological tradition with the recently recovered body of Aristotle's philosophy, due largely to Muslim scholars' preservation of texts that had been lost in the Greco-Roman world, and to their translations, and commentaries.

Traditions sometimes fall into epistemological crises, due to internal incoherence, new experiences that cannot be accounted for, and challenges from rival traditions. One of MacIntyre's major contributions is to refute the relativist's supposition that traditions will always appear successful to their own adherents. Traditions can sometimes be judged relative to one another on the basis of whether or not they can, on their own terms, overcome their crises. In happy cases one tradition can be seen to be rationally superior to its rival in that the one can explain *why* its rival fell into a crisis, and *had to fail* at just the point it did. A special case of this is when the explanation of the failure comes as a result of finding means of incorporating the rival's most significant claims into one's own tradition. This ability provides the best grounds one can have for saying that the surviving tradition's account of reality is more adequate. A tradition that survives such dialectical questioning by a variety of rivals is in position to claim, provisionally, that its account of reality is true. This is the reason that recounting the historical vicissitudes of traditions is essential for their justification.

So in the course of arguing for his position in ethics, he has developed a concept of tradition-constituted rationality that has much broader applications. One that may be of particular interest to readers of this journal is the comparison of large-scale religious traditions.[1]

Clearly Thomas is the hero of *Whose Justice*. First, he solved a major crisis for the Augustinian tradition by showing how it could be united with the newly rediscovered Aristotelian tradition. Second, he judged what he now calls the Thomist tradition to be superior to both the Enlightenment tradition and its Nietzschean critics. A third reason was MacIntyre's judgment that, for the purposes of ethics, Thomas provided a much superior account of the *telos* of human life than Aristotle could. The intermediate step was Augustine's *City of God*, in which he provided relationship with a personal God as humankind's *telos*.

Although MacIntyre was a Presbyterian Christian in his early years, he abandoned religion for most of his life. His judgment that the Thomist tradition was superior in all these ways led him to become a Thomist philosopher and Catholic Christian. I shall apply his concept of a tradition in the next section to the writings of Mulla Sadra.

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1. However, in personal conversation he asked why anyone would want to use his work for this purpose.

6. Mulla Sadra, Thomas, and MacIntyre

As mentioned above, I have scant knowledge of Persian philosophy, so I followed the advice I often give to students: use widely recognized secondary sources. In philosophy, two of these are *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1998); and the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2019).

Routledge has multiple entries on Islamic philosophy, as well as on many individual Islamic philosophers. The entry on modern philosophy states that the main emphasis "in recent Persian philosophy has been on the thought of Mulla Sadra and al-Suhrawardi" (Morewedge and Leaman, 1998, 5:19).[1] The article on Mulla Sadra states that he was the leading figure in the revival of philosophy in Safavid Iran, and notes his connections to the Illuminationist movement (Cooper, 1998, Vol. 6, p. 595), making him particularly relevant to this article. The *Stanford Encyclopedia* devotes a lengthy article to Mulla Sadra. I believe that these two sources alone provide ample justification for my concentrating only on this one Iranian thinker.

My first plan for this section was simply to show that Mulla Sadra's and his followers' work could be described in MacIntyrean terms as a tradition of *moral enquiry* (should it be called the Sadrian tradition?), and thus using the categories of authoritative texts, his concept of Ultimate Reality, the *telos* of human life, the practices involved, the internal goods of those practices, and the virtues required for participation. I also hoped to provide either parallels or differences between his positions on all of these with those of Thomas himself or of MacIntyre. However, I have only been able to provide a few of these.

Another way in which I had hoped to extend this section is by means of MacIntyre's distinction between (limited) traditions of *moral* enquiry and what he came to call *large scale* traditions, due to his recognition that moral disagreements turn out to depend on conflicting accounts of rational justification. And rationality itself is a concept with a history of diverse traditions, each with its own specific mode of enquiry. Consequently, I hoped to complete this section by examining Mulla Sadra's conception of the components and structure of the process of acquiring knowledge and truth, and to compare it with MacIntyre's most sophisticated account of Thomas's (I believe, strikingly parallel) account. However, limits of time and space only permit a few brief remarks, leading to omission of some of Mulla Sadra's most interesting contributions. For purposes of organization I shall employ the categories MacIntyre attributes to traditions of enquiry.

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1. I chose Mulla Sadra rather than al-Suhrawardi because of a sense, which I have been unable to put into anything like adequate verbal form, that Mulla Sadra, and MacIntyre's version of Thomism share much in common on the issue of spiritual knowledge.

Authoritative Texts

The question of Mulla Sadra's authoritative texts is interesting and complicated. Just as Christianity is split into two major sub-traditions – eastern and western – Islam is split into (at least) two major sub-traditions – Shia and Sunni. Since the Reformation in the early 1500s, western Christianity has had four major sub-sub-traditions – Catholic, Lutheran, mainline Reformed, and the Radical-Reformation traditions – each with major authoritative texts. So Mulla Sadra would be the founder of a sub-sub-tradition, with his major text, in simplified English, called *The Four Journeys* (1610–1628); this would be parallel to Thomas's *Summa Theologiae* (1266–1273) and *Summa contra Gentiles* (1259–1265). Both Thomas and Mulla Sadra are renown for integrating previous sources. Mulla Sadra is famous for synthesizing his exegeses of the Qur'an[1] with mainstream thoughts of the Peripatetics (particularly Aristotle and Neoplatonists, largely as represented by medieval thinkers such as Ibn Sina and Ibn al-'Arabi); the illuminationism of Suhrawardi; Shi'ite theology; and "his Transcendental Wisdom" (Ahmed & Tahir, 2018, 38:12). Thomas is most noted for solving the conflict between the Augustinian theological tradition and the Aristotelian corpus. MacIntyre lists Augustine, later medieval Christian thinkers, and medieval Islamic philosophical theologians as *prologues* to the Thomist tradition; he follows chapters on each of these and on Thomas himself with two chapters titled "From Scholasticism to Skepticism," and "Descartes, Pascal, and Arnauld" (MacIntyre, 2009, ch. 13 & 14).

I give disproportionate attention to this issue because it bears on comparison of the positive influence of illumination in Islam with its skeptical effects in the modern West. Descartes lived nearly concurrently with Mulla Sadra – (1596–1650) versus (c. 1571–1636/40). Descartes writes that after he finished his education at the Jesuit Collège Royale de La Flèche, whose curriculum included Aristotelian logic, metaphysics, physics, and ethics, (and surely Augustinian-inspired spiritual exercises), he rejected much of what he had been taught. In fact, Thomas himself recognized a naturalized version of illumination in this life, identifying it with Aristotle's agent intellect with its power to abstract universal natures from sense perceptions (MacDonald, 1998, Vol. 4, p. 699). In the life to come, our intellect will be a sort of intelligible light deriving from God's primordial light (McDermott, 1989, p. 26).[2] When intellectual developments outside the universities drew Descartes back to philosophical work, his best known contribution was what we now call the

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1. Strangely, it is widely believed in the U.S. that there is no such thing as Qur'anic exegesis!

2. Many Christians believe that Thomas in fact experienced the "beatific vision" in this life, after which he refused to do further writing, saying that it "seems like straw by comparison with what I have seen and what has been revealed to me" (Kretzmann and Stump, in E. Craig, 1998, Vol. 1, p. 333).

Cartesian theater, whose skeptical consequences are detailed above.

Ultimate Reality

For both Mulla Sadra and Thomas, Ultimate Reality, of course, is God. The most notable differences between the two are Mulla Sadra's greater influence by Neoplatonism, and the fact that Mulla Sadra is famous for asserting that God is pure existence, while Thomas claims that God's uniqueness lies in the fact that his existence and essence are one and the same. However, the further one pursues this in his *Summa Theologiae* (Ia), it comes to seem more a verbal than real difference, in that Thomas, from that statement on, speaks almost entirely of God's existence. Mulla Sadra (and Thomas) wrote that existence is pure goodness and the ground of all value. God creates in order to spread that goodness throughout the cosmos.[1]

The telos of Human Life

Existence admits of degrees, and is in a constant process of change. For instance, the soul is corporeal in its origination and spiritual in its survival. It is on a path toward perfection and reversion to its origin in God (Rizvi, 2019, § 4.2: 12).[2]

Because existence is central to Mulla Sadra's entire system, a major goal of life must be to come to knowledge of it, either by an intellectual or experiential approach, by which I suspect he means not at all so much sensory experience (due to his Neoplatonism) but rather by something more akin to mystical awareness – presential knowledge. The intellectual approach involves the pursuit of wisdom and constitutes a process of *theosis*. The soul jettisons the material body but is resurrected due to intellectual connection with the creative power of God. Rizvi writes that "scripture does not define the nature of the body that is resurrected… . The body of the afterlife … still retains the property of being a body but unlike one with which we are familiar" (Rizvi, 2019, §5.2:16).[3]

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1. Note that while I distinguished above (in n3) between modern and medieval senses of realist–anti-realist debates, there is actually a connection here. Mulla Sadra's insistence that there is only existence and no essences or quiddities is parallel to my claim above that the modern worry about anti-realism has the direction of fit backwards: the commonsense and correct view is that there is a real world and the knowledge problem is to find the best way of understanding it.

2. The online *Stanford Encyclopedia* is difficult to cite because it has no fixed page numbers; it can be read or printed in many sizes of type. Therefore, I give the relevant section along with the page number of the version with the smallest typeface.

3. Note the correspondence with my remark at the end of §3.

Practices

Both MacIntyre and Mulla Sadra have written that philosophy, just as it was understood to be in antiquity, is a way of life; one that requires enough humility first to be taught by the authorities. This submission to authority results in the transformation of students in that the truths thereby understood are not merely grasped through cognition but combine theoretical and practical knowledge into a holistic ethics of living (Rizvi, 2019, §2.1:4). During this transformation, accepted beliefs become heart-felt, but only with the light of knowledge one will one have insight and vision for religious truths (Khazaei, 2018, p. 70). The great emphasis Mulla Sadra places on development of the capacities of the mind for knowledge provides an interesting parallel with Thomas, for whom doing theology and developing one's devotion to God are inextricable.

Thus, there are two sorts of practices that are essential for the development of virtue. One is learning the skills of reasoning: acquiring the abilities for analysis, forming judgments, demonstrative reasoning. The second is becoming pure of heart and opening oneself to the grace of "presential knowledge," which is receiving the inner reality of light. Developing purity of heart can begin with rituals and self-purification by refraining from vices, but it is developed especially by the practices of prayer and meditation. These two sorts of practices are the central ones for Thomas as well (Sullivan, 1926, p. 14).

Virtues

One essential virtue has already been mentioned: the humility to be taught by the authorities, and this entails the virtue of loyalty to one's masters. Self-control is required for ascetical purification as well as for the persistence involved in intellectual development.

Mulla Sadra's emphasis on the role of the mind in cultivation of virtue suggests that peacefulness, both in prayer and in promoting the ability for both contemplation and intellectual endeavors, is particularly important. Because generosity (in *the Qur'an*) includes not only giving of one's financial resources, but also of knowledge and energy, I suspect that, again, due to his emphasis on the role of the intellect in cultivation of virtue, his concept of generosity, exemplified in his long teaching and writing career, led to his particular awareness of the virtue of generosity with regard to *knowledge*. Two others of particular note would be avoidance of self-deception, due to the connection between self-knowledge and knowledge of God, along with the virtue of thinking for oneself.

Being a devoted Muslim and expert student of the Qur'an, it probably goes

without saying that the virtues promoted in the Qur'an are all relevant in Mulla Sadra's life. I list here but a few: generosity, justice, faith, God-consciousness, kindness to all, paying welfare dues to provide for others in need, including wayfarers (for this partial catalogue see Osman, 1997, pp. 666-680).[1] Patience in times of adversity might be particularly important to Shia Muslims.

Epistemology, Justification, and Truth:

When I conceived this section, as noted above, I hoped to incorporate Mulla Sadra's account of the acquisition and justification of knowledge, and compare it to MacIntyre's. I shall just make a brief remark: I believe that in both cases one could speak of the structure of the noetic process as "first the way up, and then the way down." Philosophy reasons from the nature of what can be known in this world to first principles, particularly to God the Creator, and downward, via theological development, to moral and religious truths. Thus, while I did not root the virtues of the Qur'an in social practices, they come in the course of theological development. This, again, is a parallel with Thomas, of whom it has been written that in order to keep his mind constantly elevated to God, pursued purity of heart and mind, sought humility, and showed no attachment to things of this world (Sullivan, 1927, p. 16).

7. Conclusion

The central goal of this article was to explain how the concept of illumination, so important in some Persian philosophies, has been a significant source of skepticism in the modern West. In brief, according to Cary, Augustine's concept of the soul as an inner space, open to divine illumination, was recovered by Descartes and Locke, but with a difference: After Locke's separation of revelation and theology as a type of knowledge entirely different from knowledge of the physical world, the Augustinian inner chamber then excluded divine illumination (Locke, 1695). A simple focus on ideas in the mind led to a quite reasonable form of skepticism, which still has repercussions today.

> These historical changes made it, for philosophers, impossible to incorporate the concept of illumination again into epistemology. According to Lakoff and Johnson, "illumination" is now only a metaphor with no literal philosophical content. I attributed to

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1. From one Christian's perspective the emphasis, *again and again*, on providing for others in need is quite outstanding.

> Wittgenstein a major role in discouraging the use of ocular metaphors in philosophical discourse, and claimed that Lakoff and Johnson provide grounds for rejecting (mistaken) claims that Wittgensteinian philosophy is relativistic.

Lakoff and Johnson's prescription for evading philosophical confusions based on metaphorical implication is not to attempt to avoid metaphors, since they are essential in the extension of knowledge beyond common experiences of the physical world, but rather to be aware of the limitations of metaphorically shaped thinking, and to incorporate a variety of extended metaphors in the development of philosophical theories.

MacIntyre's highly sophisticated account of human reason began with the examination of social practices, and can therefore be described as development of the metaphor Knowing As Doing. By means of his extension of Thomas Aquinas's philosophical-theological system, MacIntyre came to incorporate Christian theistic elements into his ontology that seem tantalizingly relevant for comparison with Mulla Sadra's tradition.

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