

This transcript accompanies the *Cambridge in your Classroom* video on 'Can philosophy teach us about God?'.  
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## Can philosophy teach us about God?

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I'm Dr Tianyi Zhang, and I am a researcher in the Faculty of Divinity in Cambridge. I'm interested particularly in philosophy of religion, and have focused a lot of my research on medieval Islamic philosophers. Two Islamic philosophers I would like to introduce you to in this video are Avicenna and Suhrawardī.

To begin with, let's do a thought experiment: Imagine that you do not grow up gradually, but are created all at once as a complete and grown-up human being, so that you can think normally, but you don't have any prior knowledge or memory. And you are suspended in the air, but you cannot feel the air. You see nothing, hear nothing, and your limbs do not touch each other. That is to say, although all of your brain functions are normal, you are deprived of all objects of knowledge. There is absolutely nothing for you to sense, imagine, remember or understand. Presumably, you also don't know any language. Under such conditions, can you still confirm the existence of yourself?

This is one of the most famous thought experiments in the history of philosophy, known as 'The Flying Man'. Designed by a towering figure of Islamic philosophy, named Ibn Sīnā. Ibn Sīnā is known to the Western world by his Latin name Avicenna.

According to Avicenna, you certainly can still confirm the existence of yourself. In fact, yourself is the only object of knowledge that can never be deprived of you. Retrospectively, you will also know that yourself is not your body, because as a flying man, you only confirm yourself without knowing anything about your body, neither your limbs, nor organs.

One major purpose of the flying man thought experiment, is to bring us back to this very primitive kind of self-knowledge. Let's call it 'primitive self-awareness'. Primitive self-awareness is essential, innate, constant and unconditional. It is what makes everyone of us an 'I', because the moment you stop being

aware of yourself, you will stop being an 'I'.

You might object by arguing that apparently you are not constantly apprehending yourself. For example, when you are reading a book, or watching this video. But, even in those moments, your primitive self-awareness is still there. It is your awareness of your primitive self-awareness that is absent.

Primitive self-awareness is so fundamental that it actually underlies everything we know, we say and we do. Because whatever you know, you say and you do, you are already aware that it is 'you' who know, say and do those things.

Later, Avicenna's concept of primitive self-awareness was adopted and developed by another Islamic philosopher named Suhrawardī, who died in 1191. Suhrawardī is the founder of the Illuminationist tradition of Islam.

According to Suhrawardī, primitive self-awareness, though so simple and basic, is the paradigm of the most perfect knowledge that human beings have. Because self-awareness requires no intermediary. We are directly apprehending ourselves without resorting to any external definitions or descriptions.

Self-awareness is constant and comprehensive. There is no single moment we are not aware of ourselves, and that we are always aware of the whole of ourselves. And it is infallible; there is no right or wrong in self-awareness.

You might wonder if there are other examples of such kind of knowledge, that have no right or wrong. Suhrawardī argues that there are. For example: the way you know your own body is very different from the way you know other things, because you have all kinds of

subtle feelings of your body. And nobody can know your body in the way you do. Certainly, you would need to describe your symptoms in detail to a doctor when you feel unwell. This is because you, and only you, have control over your body. You know your body as it is without any intermediary, and this knowledge is also constant and infallible.

Sense perception, or the understanding you get through using one of your senses such as sight, smell, taste, touch or hearing is also of this type of knowledge. Though it is inferior because it requires corresponding sense organs as intermediaries, and sense perceptions can easily be deprived of you, unlike self-awareness and your knowledge of your own body.

But, sense perceptions are also infallible. If you see a stick bends in some water your eyes are not lying to you. They show you the real image. It is your judgement that the stick actually bends that is fallible, not the sense data themselves. You either know the sense data or you don't, there is no right or wrong.

Bertrand Russell, the great British philosopher, who came to Cambridge as a young student, also speaks about this type of infallible knowledge. He calls it 'knowledge by acquaintance'. Suhrawardī calls it 'presential knowledge' because self-awareness, your knowledge of your body, and the sense perceptions all occur simply due to the very presence of the objects of knowledge themselves to you directly. None of them are representations of the objects.

The real significance of presential knowledge lies in the way we do philosophy, and the way we know God and other divine beings like the angels.

From the very existence of the presential knowledge we already have, it can be inferred that there might also be some

even superior presential knowledge that we can pursue.

Suppose, you're not only controlling your body but also controlling everything else that surrounds you in a similar way: the desk, the chair, the walls and even dust. You will know all these things just like how you know your body and yourself. And your knowledge of them would also be constant, comprehensive and infallible. All those things will be present to you, together with yourself.

According to Suhrawardī, this gives us an idea of what God's knowledge must be like. God knows everything in a presential way because God is the absolute cause of everything that exists, and He has absolute control over everything. Everything, together with His self, are present to Him, all at once. He apprehends every detail of everything, in one single grasp.

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato frequently claimed that every philosopher endeavours to become godlike. Suhrawardī, as perhaps the greatest representative of Plato in Islam, adopts this very ideal. For Suhrawardī, to become godlike is to know everything in the way God does.

To become godlike, is to get a share of the divine knowledge, which is exactly this superior type of presential knowledge that we should be striving for.

Ideally, the real way to know God and divine beings, is not by forming concepts, propositions, philosophical arguments about them, but rather, this should be achieved by spiritual observation, like astronomers who observe the heavenly bodies directly, by spiritual tasting and unveiling the truth, by making the very truth present to you.

But, this does not mean philosophy is unnecessary, because eventually, only

very few blessed individuals might have the privilege of possessing this type of superior presential knowledge.

I would argue that philosophy, if properly and rigorously done, will provide us with a glimpse of what the truth must be like.

I hope this example from Islamic philosophy shows us how this is possible.

Do you agree?