

# An Overview on Perception and Its Principles from Avicenna's Point of View

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## Abstract

The main purpose this paper attempts to reach is to recognize principles of perception, its dimensions and types from Avicenna's point of view. This study is a qualitative study conducted using descriptive-analytical methods. Resources are first reviewed and principles of perception along with its process are extracted from his perspective. Findings of this study revealed that in the philosophy of Avicenna, soul is of a prominent position and is the base for perception. For him, growth and perfection of soul breed various cognitive capabilities. In fact, vegetative, animal and human faculties have their roots in the soul so as discussion on the stages of soul is divided into three stages of vegetative, animal and human in Avicenna's point of view. Cognitive capabilities of humans are to aid these faculties reach perfection. For instance, superficial cognitive capabilities are obtained in animal soul's stage and higher levels of perception including receiving emanation from active intellect occurs in human soul's stage.

**Keywords:** Avicenna; Base of perception; Types of perception

## Introduction

One of the most comprehensive schools of Islamic philosophy is the Avicenna philosophy for he is among the most prominent scientists of Islamic civilization and culture. He defended Aristotelianist philosophy and did not ever limit him soul to that, offering novel ideas to the world of knowledge so that, in the medieval times, he became unique in many ways. Not only was he of a unique figure among Muslim philosophers of that time, but also he is considered among the most important figures of Islamic philosophy history. He created a stable and comprehensive philosophical system that resisted protests from Al-Ghazali, Fakhr ad-Din ar-Razi, etc. and dominated the heritage of Muslim philosophy for centuries and his innovations gave a sublime position to it. One of these innovations is the formulation of science orienting on the concept of perception. Discussions on perception are among the most precious issues in philosophical discussions. In fact, discussion on perception ends in the highest level of human characteristic. This paper attempts to have a look at perception from Avicenna's point of view and find an answer to the following questions:

- What is the role of soul in the process of perception from Avicenna's point of view?
- What are the types and levels of perception from Avicenna's point of view?

## Society under study and research method

Authors of this paper have referred to Avicenna's works and other works of other thinkers about him and through a descriptive-analytical method as one of the methods in qualitative researches have analyzed discussions on perception.

## An overview over Avicenna's ideas on soul

Before entering the discussion on perception from Avicenna's point of view, and in order to reach a better understanding from his views, elaborating on his ideas on soul seems to be crucial for soul is the basis for perception.

## Definition of soul

Since Avicenna is a peripatetic philosopher he follows the ideas of Aristotle on soul. However, as it will become clear later on, he modifies definition of Aristotle from soul so that his belief in incorporeity of the soul

approaches Plato's ideas. For Avicenna, soul is the first perfection for an instrumentalist natural body possessing potential life (Avicenna, 1371 Hijri: A, 53; Avicenna, 1400 Hijri: 167). In other words, the first perfection for a natural body is an instrument for the soul in its deeds. Avicenna believes that three terms of power, form and perfection could be used to define soul. In his book, *Shafa* (the book of Healing), he states: Soul could be considered as possessing "power" as we do on rational and sensory concepts, in other definition, it could be called "power" and used the concept of "form" for the material in which it emerges and make out the animal and vegetative essence up. From the point of view of perfection of material using the material attached to the "type" yields and either in superior or inferior forms, it is called "perfection" (Avicenna, 2008: 40). In spite of using three terms of power, form and perfection to define soul, Avicenna prefers the word perfection to define soul for, he believes, is of priority for defining perfection: "However, the power of reading is valuable because it forms actions and the form of reading is valuable for it uses soul to create a material for the deed. But perfection of reading is valuable for in spite of the nature of material, it becomes type. If we want to constraint soul, perfection is of higher priority than other definitions for the title power is attributed to the soul for two reasons: one is that action comes out of it and the other is the repentance coming to it. People's soul has a potential and this is the power of stimulation and movement; it also has the repentance power which is the power to perceive. The title power in both meanings is for the commonality and if it is used for one the other will be neglected with a partial limit. The title form is used for the body of material for it corrupts in the right so that I understood from books on arguments that perfection is of higher priority to be used in the limits (Avicenna, 1952: 9- 10)." Yet, Aristotle believes that soul is sometimes action, or form or the perfection of the body.

The definition offered for the soul needs further explanations to be presented here: The first perfection; in the sixth technique of naturals, Avicenna states: perfection is of two types: the first and the second. The first perfection takes type to reality like the form of the sword; the second perfection is its actions following its thoroughness of its type like cutting for the sword and differentiation and thought and sentiments for humans (Avicenna: 2008: 48). Therefore, because soul realizes human type, it is the first perfection.

#### Stages of the soul and its powers

As it was said, for Avicenna, the origin of perception and movement is the soul. He believes these actions begin with three vegetative, animal and human faculties. He calls them soul powers or mere soul. In fact, Avicenna like his predecessors considers three stages for the soul including vegetative, animal and human souls.

- A. Vegetative soul: vegetative soul is the first perfection for the natural instrumentalist body for it breeds, grows and eats (Avicenna, 1985: 319). Vegetative soul has three nutritive, growth and productive powers (Avicenna, 1952: 13- 14).
- B. Animal soul: animal soul is the first perfection for instrumentalist natural body for it can perceive details and move purposefully (Avicenna, 1985: 320). Animal soul is divided to kinetic and perceptive powers. Kinetic power is of two types by itself: causative and active kinetic powers. Kinetic power is the aspiration power that stimulates the imagination to want or flee. This power has two branches of lust and wrath (Avicenna, 1992: 58- 59). Active kinetic power is the power inside muscles and neurons and stimulates them to move the joints of the body toward the destination. Sometimes loosens them or lengthens them. Later they stand against each other (Avicenna, 2008: 137). The second type of animal faculties is the perceptive power which is of two types of inside and outside perception like kinetic power (Avicenna, 1952: 16- 23). In the section discussing perception, they will be discussed fully. It can be said that perception and especially sensory perception is of a human power in the level of animals.
- C. Human soul: the third stage which is also the highest one is the human soul which has the perfections of vegetative and animal souls and has the capability of perceiving generalities. As it is stated in the definition of this stage of soul, human soul is the first perfection for the natural instrumentalist body from the point of view of intentional actions and deduction and from the point of view of perceiving generalities (Avicenna, 1981: 330). The rational soul is divided into two powers of knowing and acting and they are both called intellect (Avicenna, 1985: 330). The reason for this similarity is they both depend on soul and this extra dependence is their common point. Another common point they have they are both perceptive and their only difference is in what they perceive (Mostafavi, 2008: 168). These two powers are like two faces of the soul. The face looking toward the body and dominates it and needs no acceptance of constraints of body is the acting intellect and the other face

looking toward higher portals for deducing knowledge is called the active intellect or the theoretical intellect (Avicenna, 1952: 26). In his treatise named *Al-Hoddod* (the Limits), Avicenna, considers theoretical intellect to be the power to perceive generalities and the active intellect to be the stimulator of enthusiasm (Avicenna, 1400 Hijri: 88). In the book of *Healing*, theoretical intellect is the origin of science and acting intellect is the origin of ethics (Avicenna, 2008: 160).

Therefore, considering vegetative, animal and human stages of soul, it could be seen that perceptive power of humans increase and reaches its highest point in the perceptive stage of soul in which a human can perceive generalities. This was not possible in previous stages; thus, now that the base for perception is defined, its types originating in the soul are discussed here.

### Definition of Perception from Avicenna's Point of View

Perception is to understand the form of something somehow. If perception perceives a material it perceives the nature of the material (Avicenna, 2008: 194). In his book of *Isharaat*, Avicenna defines perception as: Perception is that the sample truth about something is formed in the preceptor's heart so that there is no contrast between them and the formation stays on. Therefore, perception of something is to comprehend the reality and observing it (Avicenna, 1403 Hijri: Vol. 2:308). Avicenna in some of his books including the book of *Healing*, *Salvation* and the *Treatise of Soul*, follows the philosophy of peripatetic. Yet, in the book *Isharaat*, as his final philosophical work, evades from their philosophy and unlike their belief in four types of perception, divides it into three types and says: the perceived is sensed, imagined and rational (Avicenna, 1403 Hijri, Vol. 2: 322-323). Therefore, Avicenna believes in three forms of rational, imaginative and sensory perceptions.

**1. Sensory perception:** Perception is accepting the form apart from the material. Therefore, senses are considered sensory and sensory perception is exemplification of the sensed in senses. In fact, sensory perception is a perception perceived by senses (Avicenna, 2008: 206). This perception is the first stage of perception in animals and humans and is the first step in obtaining knowledge which is superficial and inherent perception. The quintet superficial senses include of sight (Avicenna, 2008: 206), hearing (Avicenna, 2008: 137), smelling (Avicenna, 1371 Hijri: A: 59), taste (Avicenna, 1371 Hijri: A: 59; Avicenna, 1985: 322) and touch (Avicenna, 2008: 137).

Another part of sensory perceptions are obtained from esoteric senses. Like his predecessors, Avicenna divided esoteric senses into five type; yet, unlike them believing that only illusion and common sense are perceived, Avicenna says: esoteric powers are perceivers. Some perceive the form, and other perceive its meaning (Avicenna, 1952: 19). These five senses exist limitedly in the animal soul and perfectly in the discursive soul including common sense (Avicenna, 1989: Vol. 3: 163), fantasy (Avicenna, 1985: 329), imagination (Avicenna, 1403 Hijri: Vol. 2: 345), illusion (Avicenna, 1371 Hijri: A: 62) and memory (Avicenna, 1989: Vol. 3: 165).

**2. Imaginary perception:** the second type of perception is the imaginary perception. Sheikh gives the example of Zeid to explain this perception and says, sometimes something is imagined and this is the time when that thing is absent and its form is present in the heart (Avicenna, 1403 Hijri, Vol. 2: 322). In fact, in imaginary perception, unlike sensory perception, presence of the body or the material is not necessary and imagination perceives something with a specific figure. Therefore, imaginary perception is complete separation of the matter and lack of separation from interests. In this perception, presence of matter with this material and its absence does not make any difference. When Zeid is seen, not only sensory perception is obtained but also imaginary perception occurs as well. Yet, the difference between imaginary form and sensory form is that imaginary form does not necessarily accompany the presence of matter; however, in case of sensory form, presence of the matter is necessary. Besides, there is the possibility of disinterestedness of time and space in sensory perception but in case of imaginary perception, it is impossible (Mostafavi, 2008: 118).

**3. Rational perception:** this type of perception is the realization of rationales in intellect without physical tools. Since in this perception, intellect can reach perception of the meanings apart from matter and its attachments, this perception is the best of all. In the perception, the perceiver which is intellect can possess a nature apart from personal belongings and prove it so that the sensed has done something that could change it to the rational. However, something which is away from pollutants unnecessary for its nature is automatically rational and does not need practices to become ready for rationality (Avicenna, 1403, Vol. 2: 326- 328). In his book of *Healing*, he uses a similar term and says, the power whose existing form is either nonmaterial forms away from materiality or material forms away from material relations is the intellect. This power perceives forms in a way they are fully

separated from the material so that it is separated from the material by itself and this separation is in form. Nevertheless, the form existing in the material whether it is for the inherent materiality or its no materiality, is perceived from the matter and its attachments and the power of intellect acquires it abstractly to give it a human nature transferrable to many all of which receive one nature. This power separates any material condition and in case the attachments are not separated it will not be transferrable to everybody (Avicenna, 2008: 205). Thus, intellect, as it was discussed in the discussion on soul, is of two types of practical and theoretical powers.

**I) Practical intellect:** practical power is the origin of human movement for minor moves and these minor moves are done based on the thoughts acting according to contractual verdicts (Avicenna, 2008: 150). In his book of Isharaat, Sheikh considers practical intellect as a power by which soul runs the body and states that practical intellect brings the power to do minor things mandatory for humans out of superficial known and experimental preliminaries and helps it reach its optional goals. In this regard, practical intellect is helped by theoretical intellect to reach the details (Avicenna, 1403 Hijri: Vol. 2: 352). Therefore, practical intellect is an intellect from which various actions are originated and the soul needs it to perfect the body. This intellect however, needs theoretical intellect to accomplish its tasks for action without thought will be void.

This power must dominate and affect the body powers according to the verdict of theoretical intellect and not be controlled by them. If this power is ruled by the body and become its servant, inferior behavior will emerge. On the other hand, if it dominates the body, superior behavior will come to existence (Avicenna, 1985: 330- 331; Avicenna, 2008: 150).

**II) Theoretical intellect:** the other power from discursive soul is the theoretical intellect or the knowing power on which the soul is dependent for its perfection in practicality (Avicenna, 1403 Hijri, Vol. 2: 353). Thus, it could be concluded that soul needs theoretical intellect for its perfection and bringing its knowledge to practice as the highest stage of soul. According to Avicenna, this power helps the discursive soul perceive generalities apart from the matter and if it is not inherently separate, it will be separated from its interests. In his book of Healing, he states: the theoretical power is the power impressing general forms apart from matters. If these general forms are inherently separate, theoretical power gets their forms easily but if they are no, they will become individual so that nothing will be left of material relations (Avicenna, 2008: 161).

### Stages of theoretical intellect

**A) Material intellect:** the first stage of theoretical intellect is the potential intellect or the material intellect whose relation to the rationale is the pure aptitude or mere power. In this stage, nothing from this intellect is practical yet, its potentials are not realized and practicality is not yet acquired. This intellect is present in all humans and the reason for its naming of “هيولانى” or monstrous” is that it has great similarities to the first monster which had no inherent forms and can take any form (Avicenna, 2008: 162- 163). according to what is said, this intellect is the most inferior form of intellect. It is in the form of pure aptitude and is still away from practicality. It lacks any intellectual form but can comprehend rationales. In short, the material intellect proves that learning aptitude for everything is potentially present in humans.

**B) Habitual intellect:** the second stage of intellect is the habitual intellect which is the possible power rationally. Habitual intellect is a stage in which immediate perceptions are obtained to reach rationales. Immediate perceptions are preliminaries approval of which does not need education or senses. These perceptions are obtained through instinct and their opposite could not be considered. For instance, the whole is bigger than the details and equal things are equal to their counterparts (Avicenna, 1371 Hijri: A: 66). At this stage, intellect has passed through material intellect and pure aptitudes reaching perfection in immediate perceptions. In other words, immediate perceptions are those which are clear to the intellect and everybody believes strongly in them. In fact, in the stage of habitual intellect, an individual reaches simple facts beyond any reasonable doubt.

**C) Actual intellect:** sometimes, the relation between theoretical intellect and the rationales is the perfection power where obtained rational forms are accomplished after immediate perceptions but mind does not scrutinize them to actualize them; yet, these rationales are archived and whenever decides to study them actually, finds they have been studied. This stage of intellect is called the actual intellect (Avicenna, 2008: 163). Therefore, theoretical intellect in its third stage is a reservoir of rationales like immediate perceptions, and secondary rationales. In other words it is a magazine of information or theoretical affairs. In order to reach this stage, an individual seeks secondary perceptions based on the immediate perceptions of the habitual intellect to gain and store the knowledge. Thus, there is a process between habitual intellect as the container of immediate perceptions and actual intellect as the container of immediate and secondary perceptions.

Rationales are generally ambiguous perceptions gained by acquisition at first. This process needs a cause to reach a result and its approval needs the cause, as mediatory inference limit, to be obtained through speculation or thinking (Avicenna, 1985: 340). Thus, humans can reach actual intellect stage through speculation or thinking.

Avicenna explains stages of theoretical intellect and mentions habitual intellect. He thinks discursive soul reaches theoretical knowledge according to primary perceptions using either thought or speculations. In fact, for him, thought and speculation are two available methods of soul to reach desirable level and discover the unknown in order to reach actual intellect. In most of his works, Sheikh explains the stages of theoretical intellect and then distinguishes between thinking and speculation. In his book of *Isharaat*, Avicenna says: thinking is the movement of soul toward definition, getting help from imagination and seeks the median of things that help extract knowledge from the unknown. In this way, acquired knowledge stored in the mind are reanalyzed and reviewed. This may be useless or it can reach desirable results. Yet, speculation is to reach the median after being interested and not making any move in mind. In other words, the median of the result formed in the mind (Avicenna, 1403 Hijri, Vol. 2: 358).

**D) Acquired intellect:** the fourth stage of theoretical intellect is the acquired intellect. At this stage, the relationship between theoretical powers to the perceived is an absolute relation. At this stage, form of the rationale is present by the intellect and actual intellect contemplates on it and the contemplation itself (Avicenna, 1371 Hijri: A: 67). This stage is the same actual intellect that observes actual rationales, contemplates and knows that actual intellect is thinking about them. The reason for this naming is that the acquired intellect occurs only after an intellect which is constantly actual i.e. it is apart from intellect, and can be used after human intellect is joined with actual intellect (Davoodi, 2008: 310).

Reaching this stage perfects the stages of animal and human intellect and first signs of similarity of human power to primary existence emerges (Avicenna, 2008: 163). When the human soul reaches this stage, he has reached virtue in sciences and morals as the ultimate human perfection. This perfection is the level of angels for the soul at this stage is an essence of practical nature (Avicenna, 1952: 163). Therefore, at the stage of acquired intellect, human reaches its climax and can observe the rationales directly. At this stage, he is elevated to a higher level and gains better correlation with primary portals. Needless to say that reaching this stage is not possible for everybody since at this stage, humans are so similar to the primary portals that every form in the universe is represented in him.

**E) Sacred intellect:** Along with all the four types of intellect mentioned above, Avicenna believes in a fifth stage called the sacred intellect. When he introduces the actual intellect, he mentions sacred intellect as well and considers it higher than actual intellect and the most superior stage of speculation. In his book of *Healing*, Avicenna, begins with learning and says if learning is inside the human this is called the power of speculation. This aptitude is very high in some people so that connection to the active intellect needs no preliminaries or any move from potential to actual. It is an aptitude needing connection to actual intellect so that the secondary aptitude or actual intellect is obtained but at this level he uses all he knows and this is the most superior level of this aptitude. This level of material intellect should be called sacred intellect for the material intellect provides the investment for profit of actual intellect. This aptitude unlike actual intellect is of an extremely high position and not many people share it. Some people are full of speculation for they are connected to spiritual portals and have a guiding soul i.e. they accept active intellect and its presence represents itself in them with all its forms. If this is not imitative or close to them, it includes median levels. This type of speculation is kind of prophecy and as the most splendid human power, it is the highest prophetic aptitude (Avicenna, 2008: 583- 585). Then, it could be concluded that humans can reach a high level of knowledge even in material intellect stage through removing inferior moralities and for some people this can be reached only after they go through various stages of intellect and after reaching the acquired knowledge.

#### **Active intellect and the reasons for its existence**

Avicenna elaborates on active intellect as the proof of the relationships between these powers after introducing the stages of discursive soul and clarifying characteristics along with cognitive and existential properties of each stage. Sheikh gives very brief information on the nature and essence of active intellect but mentions that active intellect is a power outside humans and is of singular and nonmaterial nature having no connection with body and bodily matters (Avicenna, 1984: 186; Avicenna, 1996). Another characteristic, sheikh mentions for active intellect which is more of a description rather than its inherent property is the relationship it creates between powers without which no intellect can reach its higher stage. Besides, in case of the position of discursive intellect, Avicenna believes that it is outside humans and controls discursive intellect from outside. This causes

the knowledge and perception of human soul to be realized. Humans need active intellect not only for obtaining knowledge but also all rationales are dependent on it and the most important feature of intellect is its actuality for if it were potential, and needed other actual factors to be actualized or privileged, a condition would arise that would continue endlessly (Avicenna, Without date: 351; Avicenna, 1952: 111). Beside these essential characteristics, Avicenna follows the mystic exemplification of intellects and believes active intellect is like fire in Sura Noor in the Holy Quran. For Avicenna, single separating essence which is actual intellect and the origin of transferring rationales to human soul is active intellect for it activates material intellect to admit blessing and become passive intellect. That is a stage of discursive intellect that activates admitting blessing and actualizes rationales to make the acquired intellect. Finally, active intellect is the essence apart from other essences whose hierarchy continues from the first origin (Avicenna, 1952: 113).

## Conclusion

In sum, it should be noted that from Avicenna's point of view, and summing up his ideas, soul is the origin of perception and knowledge for him so as it begins human ability to perfect the soul and emerges that soul is moving from potential to actual conditions. In animal stage, it can only perceive senses and store them. Humans cannot perceive mental matters at this stage. As they go further and reach a higher human perfection, he can gain control over all his mental and physical affairs and understanding the details differentiate evil from good and perfecting its soul from theoretical intellect reaches the level of active intellect.

It was also found that theoretical intellect is divided into several stages of material, habitual, actual and acquired intellects and after these stages, Avicenna, believes in the fifth intellect called sacred intellect. This fifth stage is the highest level pertaining excellent speculation power for he believed anyone reaching this stage can gain knowledge beyond intellects and specifically acquired intellect. Therefore, the important point in understanding the concept of perception is that humans can reach actual intellect through two ways: the first one is through thinking which is in need of education and intellect is reached after preparations are done on perceptions from previous stages including sensory perceptions and unknown affairs i.e. this creates an ability or capacity that can use active intellect gain knowledge. The second way is through speculation. In this way, no education is needed and is self-learned. The condition for this method is purifying the soul from impurities and cleansing the soul. In this way, the unknown becomes known for the active intellect as revelation. The knowledge that cannot be obtained normally is revealed like this.

Thus, in case of intellectual perception, soul powers must reach perfection of human levels. In this level, humans continue through material, habitual, actual and acquired powers to reach knowledge through active intellect. Therefore, intellectual perception needs to go through various stages and education yet in case of revelation, such a need does not exist. If humans can purify their souls, they can reach the truth acquired in acquired intellect stage in material intellect stage. Therefore, active intellect for Avicenna is the connector between powers and no stage of intellect could be passed and actualized without it. This intellect is outside human soul and controls discursive soul from outside. It also realizes science and knowledge and is necessary for acquiring knowledge. All intellects depend on it and an important feature of it is its actuality.

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