

**“All Knowledge is either Conception or Assent.” On the History and
Significance of a Fundamental Distinction in Islamic Philosophy**

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Following Aristotle, classical Islamic philosophers distinguished between two types of knowledge: conception and assent. This article argues that the discussions elicited by this distinction are an essential feature of postclassical Islamic philosophy (ca. 1200-1800). The early postclassical philosophers made the distinction central to logic and thereby to epistemology and scientific inquiry at large. As the distinction came to be perceived as problematic, it sparked philosophical arguments about a range of issues in logic and epistemology. One particularly pertinent problem was the nature of the distinction itself: it was understood as an exclusive disjunction, but it seemed impossible to define one notion without recourse to the other. In the 14th century this led to the emergence of a new genre of philosophical writings exclusively dedicated to discussing the precise nature of the distinction. This article discusses some of the central arguments of these writings, showing how philosophers grappling with that problem devised new theories of judgment or the form of the proposition as they were continuously developing their theory of knowledge.

Knowledge; conception; assent; judgment; Islamic philosophy; Arabic logic; Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rāzī al-Taḥṭānī; al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī; Mullā Ṣadra; Mīr Zāhid Harawī

Introduction

Recent research on the history of philosophy in the Islamicate world has been exploring the long-neglected period after about 1200. A remarkable aspect of the philosophical tradition spreading from the Persian heartland was the development of logic as a discipline severed from any textual ties to Aristotle. This new logic was an independent field of research but was often presented as the first part of tripartite works on philosophy (the other parts being physics and metaphysics). As had the *Organon* before, it served both as the epistemological foundation and as the scientific method for the other parts of philosophy.

By the 13th century, many philosophical works begin by stating a fundamental distinction between two forms of knowledge: conception (*taṣawwur*) and assent (*taṣdīq*).¹ Roughly, if you have knowledge in the form of a conception, you have the appropriate form (*ṣūra*) of something readily available in your mind; if you have knowledge in the form of an assent, you believe that something is the case.² This distinction shaped not only logic as a scientific method, but it also structured the epistemological foundations on which philosophy rested.

The fundamental character of this distinction as well as its controversial nature have been noted for a while.³ However, in light of recent research we can now present a fuller and more contextualised picture of the history and significance of the distinction. In what follows, I first (I)

¹ There are different ways *taṣdīq* is translated in anglophone scholarship, for example as “belief” or “assertion”. None of them, including “assent”, is really felicitous. For example, Arabic authors often use the plural *taṣdīqāt* to refer objects of assent, but “assents” is slightly awkward in English and does not convey that sense. I acquiesce however in translating “assent” as a technical term, because it seems to me the least problematic option, and put up with the awkwardness of using it in the plural.

² It should be noted that the notion of knowledge (*‘ilm*) as used by medieval Arabic philosophers is, generally speaking, broader than what contemporary epistemological theories usually assume. One important difference is that for medieval Arabic authors, knowledge (*‘ilm*) need not, in the first place, be true. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

³ See for example Wolfson, *Tasawwur*, van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre*, 95-113 and Maróth, *Tasawwur*. The only substantial study to date is a translation with introduction of the 17th century *Treatise on Conception and Assertion* by Mullā Ṣadra (d. 1635): Lameer, *Conception*, together with Lameer, *Tusi’s Criticism*. On Taḥṭānī’s treatise, see Türker, *The Notion of Assent*. Sharī‘atī prefaced his editions of Taḥṭānī’s and Mulla Ṣadra’s, as well as of Ḥarawī’s works with short studies in Arabic (Taḥṭānī, *Risālatān*, 5-46; Harawī, *Sharḥ*, 5-72).

sketch the Avicennan material to which the first postclassical philosophers responded. Next, I (II) show how the “new logicians” made the distinction fundamental to philosophy. In (III) I argue that Taḥṭānī’s treatise responded to problems raised about the very nature of the distinction by proposing a new theory of judgment. In (IV) I show how this theory was later critically developed by Jurjānī, and how Mullā Ṣadra and Harawī attempted to address the problematic nature of the distinction. That problematic nature led to the ever-increasing attention scholars paid to discussing the division of knowledge in works specifically dedicated to that purpose, most of which still await study (V).

I Conception and Assent in Fārābī and Avicenna

The Baghdad philosopher Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 950/1) was probably the first to use the terms “conception” and “assent” to distinguish two types of knowledge. As Lameer has convincingly argued (Lameer, *Conception*, 20), the distinction between conception and assent in the work of Fārābī most likely reflects a distinction Aristotle had made in the *Posterior Analytics*. There, the Stagirite states that all teaching and learning requires previous knowledge in two ways: of some things *that* they are, and of some *what* they are (Aristotle, *Analytica*, 71a1-13). In Aristotle, the context of the distinction is to explain, ultimately, how scientific demonstration is possible.

Regardless of whether one thinks this is a good reading of Aristotle, it is important that Fārābī himself begins his *On Demonstration* by dividing all knowledge into two types: “conception is the conception of a thing in a way that encapsulates the thing’s essence” whereas “assent in general is when a human believes that something is the case and judges accordingly that the existence of that thing outside the mind is exactly how it is believed in the mind” (see Fārābī, *Kitāb al-burhān* 19.4-20.5).

Avicenna introduces a fuller account of the distinction, moving it to the first book (*Madkhal*) of his *opus magnum*, the *Shifā'*.⁴

A thing is known in one of two ways: the first consists in its conception only, so that [...] its meaning is represented in the mind even if there is neither truth nor falsity, like when it is said “man” or “do this”, since when you understand the meaning of [the expression] addressed to you, you have conceived it. The second consists in that, along with the conception, there is an assent, so that when you are told, for instance: “every whiteness is an accident”, not only do you attain from this the conception of the statement’s meaning, but you also assent to the fact that it is so.

As to when you doubt whether it is so or not, you have conceived what is said, for you do not doubt about what you neither conceive nor understand. But you have not yet assented to it (every assent comes with a conception, but not the reverse). The conception of such meaning helps you to produce in the mind the form of this composition and of that by which it is composed, like “whiteness” and “accident.” Assent consists in realizing in the mind the relation of this form to the things themselves with regard to the fact that the form corresponds to them, whereas denial is the opposite. (Ibn Sīnā, *The Healing*, 30.10-32.2*; tr. modified from Di Vincenzo)

Avicenna here points out that every assent requires a conception, but not vice-versa. He describes how we proceed from conceptions to assents: having formed conceptions from our understanding of words or phrases, we can produce alongside these conceptions the form of their composition in our mind. If we believe that the form of the composition in fact corresponds to a

⁴ Translations marked with an asterisk are collaborative translations by the author and Peter Adamson, soon to appear in Adamson, Klinger, et al., *Logic and Epistemology*. Unless otherwise indicated, all remaining translations are the author’s alone.

state of affairs, we assert this relation.⁵

Already in Fārābī and Avicenna, the division of all knowledge into conceptions and assents is intended to be exhaustive and non-reducible. Anything that counts as knowledge will be either a conception or an assent, and nothing else counts as knowledge. Nor can conceptions and assents be reduced to one another, or to other more fundamental notions. The precise nature of the distinction remains however obscure. It appears that Fārābī simply equated assent with judgment. Avicenna was explicit that assent includes at least one conception. It is worth pointing out what the distinction is not about. First, it is not between conceptual and propositional knowledge, because conceptions include what is signified by (provided it is not yet assented to) “Every whiteness is an accident”. But this is clearly not a concept, like for example “prime number.” We understand or know what a prime number is when we know that it is a number divisible only by 1 or itself. “Every whiteness is an accident” is not a concept that we understand in that way. Second, the distinction is not between judgeable content and judgment, because what “Do this!” signifies is not a judgeable content. This imprecision gave rise to extensive discussions on the nature of knowledge, with ramifications for foundational and applied epistemology, and the foundations of logic.

II The Fundamental Role of the Distinction in Rāzī and Khūnajī: Spawning Discussions in Logic and Epistemology

The first two of what the 14th century historian Ibn Khaldūn called the “new logicians” – Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) and Afḍal al-Dīn al-Khūnajī (d. 1248) – both systematized and criticized

⁵ For a more detailed discussion, see Lameer, *Conception*, 19-35 on Fārābī, and Strobino, *Avicenna’s Theory*, 13-40 on Avicenna.

Avicennan logic. Their work on logic was pivotal in shaping Arabic logic as a field of inquiry independent of Aristotle's texts while being in critical conversations with Avicenna's works. Comparing the introductions of their most important works on logic gives a sense of how central the notions of conception and assent had become for both, yet how different their general outlook was. This, in turn, spawned a host of discussions in logic and epistemology.

The Introductions of Rāzī's Mulakhkhaṣ and Khūnajī's Kashf al-asrār

The logic part of Rāzī's major philosophical summa, the *Mulakhkhaṣ*, already exhibits the formal division into one part on the acquisition of conceptions and another on the acquisition of assents.⁶ It is prefaced by an introduction in which the distinction between conception and assent is first introduced and then applied to arguments for the need of logic and the delimitation of its subject matter. These are the very first lines of the introduction:

When a conception is judged by a negation or an affirmation, then together this is an assent. The difference between [conception and assent] is just like the difference between simple and compound. Every assent must have three conceptions to count as proper knowledge: the truth of the judgment, the object of the judgment, and that by which [the object] is judged. When one of them is not conceptualized, judgment is impossible. (Rāzī, *Manṭiq*, 7.5-8*)

Rāzī felt the need to specify, in the second sentence of his philosophical *opus magnum*, what

⁶ There were of course important authors between Avicenna and Rāzī who also made this distinction.

However, with one exception I am not aware of authors who make the distinction central to the structure of their logical works in any comparable way. The exception is 'Umar b. Sahlān al-Sāwī (d. ca. 1145) who uses the distinction to structure at least part of his *Kitāb al-Baṣā'ir al-Naṣīriyya fī 'ilm al-manṭiq* (Insights into the Science of Logic [Dedicated] to al-Naṣīr). We know that Rāzī studied that work; see Street, *Arabic Logic*, 573, and Sāwī, *Kitāb al-Baṣā'ir*.

precisely the difference between conception and assent is. It is not, as in Fārābī and Avicenna, primarily that one involves judgment, and the other does not. It is that conceptions are simple items, whereas assents are compound ones. Rāzī insisted that assent as proper knowledge consisted of at least three conceptions: that of the subject, that of the predicate, and that of the truth of the judgment.

This position was new in the tradition, and Rāzī immediately anticipates an objection (Rāzī, *Manṭiq*, 8.1-9). If three items of conception-knowledge are required for an assent to count as assent-knowledge, then what about the following:

“Nothing true can be said about the absolutely unknown” is true.

This seems to be a true assent. The conception of the subject is what “the absolutely unknown” refers to, the conception of the predicate is what “is such that nothing true can be said about it” refers to, and the conception of the truth of the judgment is what the entire sentence expresses. The problem is that the conception of the subject is such that it is not known, and hence cannot count as conception-knowledge. On Rāzī’s account of assent, judgment should not be possible. Rāzī offered a solution, but the paradox elicited further discussions for centuries (see Lameer, *Ghayr al-ma’lūm*). The origin of these discussions lay in Rāzī’s new account of assent.

Rāzī then goes on to introduce the distinction between immediate and inferential conceptions and assents (Rāzī, *Manṭiq*, 8.10-9.5). Like Aristotle and Avicenna, he argues that some conceptions and assents must be primitive or immediate, whereas others must be acquired or inferential.⁷ If all were immediate, nothing would be unknown; if all were inferential, there

⁷ The distinction between immediate and acquired knowledge was of course an important distinction drawn already in earlier *kalām*. For Rāzī’s use of both traditions, see for example Jacobsen Ben Hammed, *Meno’s Paradox*, 325-31.

would be no starting point for the acquisition of knowledge. If this is so, we must at some point infer a non-immediate assent from immediate ones. This raises a puzzle: If in a deduction the assents in the premises are immediately known, and they immediately imply the conclusion, how do we not also immediately know the assent in the conclusion? If we can know the premises immediately, but fail to know the conclusion immediately, it seems that we must have some additional assent-knowledge of the inference rule – but this would go on *ad infinitum*! Rāzī comes back to this form of Carroll’s paradox throughout the *Mulakhkhaṣ* and the issue was extensively debated by later logicians (Klinger, *Forms of Carroll’s Paradox*). These discussions took their departure from Rāzī’s distinction between immediate and inferential conceptions and assents.

In the second part of the introduction Rāzī uses the notions of conception and assent to delimit the subject matter of logic and to justify the formal structure of his work (Rāzī, *Manṭiq*, 10.2-11). We come to acquire knowledge based on conceptions we form – through sense perception – of the true nature of things. We may judge by way of specification that the conception of “human” is defined as a rational animal, or by predication that humans are capable of laughter. “Definition”, “proposition” and “syllogism” are however not conceptions of the true natures of things. Rather, they are second-order conceptions that are true of our first-order conceptions once they are subjected to logical reasoning.

Logic is in the business of studying the properties of this subclass of conceptions and assents that are of a second order. The goal is to extract the rules for correctly moving from prior first-order conceptions and assents to new ones. Because there are two fundamentally different ways in which we compound some conceptions with others, namely by definition and description on the one hand, and by predicative judgments on the other, the appropriate structure for a work

on logic is to divide it into two parts: one dealing with the rules for the acquisition of new conceptions, the other with the acquisition of new assents. Rāzī's account of the subject matter of logic is squarely Avicennan, but the central role he accords to the notions of conception and assent for the structure of logic as a science is new.

Khūnajī's *Kashf al-asrār*, one of the most influential works in the Arabic logical tradition, does not follow the bipartite structure of Rāzī's work. However, it likewise begins with the division of knowledge:

Knowledge is either conception (when it is a simple perception (*idrāk*)) or it is assent (when along with the judgment of one thing being related to another there is an affirmation or denial). (Khūnajī, *Kashf*, 6.3-4*)

Conception is equated with a simple perception, i.e., the form of something in the mind. Assent is not, as in Rāzī, a compound of several conceptions including judgment, but rather the affirmation or denial of one thing being related to another.

Khūnajī also differs from Rāzī in his account of the subject matter of logic (Khūnajī, *Kashf*, 8.13-9.2). For Khūnajī, objects of conception are concepts that can be singled out by an explanatory phrase (used synonymously here with Rāzī's "restrictive specification"). For *giraffe* to be picked out by "long-necked African ungulate", or to be a universal or a genus, are not features of giraffes, but accidents of *giraffe*, i.e., the conception of giraffes. But *giraffe* is a first-order conception, for it is a conception of the true nature of a giraffe, as Rāzī formulated it. On Rāzī's account of the subject matter of logic, *giraffe* would not be something whose accidents the logician investigates. For Khūnajī, however, it is essential that a logician studies the accidents also of first-order conceptions, because those, too, have inherent properties – like being a universal or a genus – that matter for logic. This position was adopted by many later logicians,

but it remained a highly controversial issue (see El-Rouayheb, *Post-Avicennan Logicians*).

Spawning Discussions in Logic and Epistemology

Rāzī and Khūnajī in the introductions to their highly influential logical works cemented the foundational character of the division of all knowledge into conceptions and assents for both logic and epistemology. Rāzī used the division to justify the bipartition of his Logic into “conceptology” and “assentology”. Logic was seen as a tool for all the other sciences, so for philosophers, the division structured all rational inquiry and hence it spilled over to other disciplines. But logic was also seen as a science in its own right which had to have its own circumscribed subject matter. With Khūnajī, who against Avicenna and Rāzī insisted that what the logician is concerned with is in fact the objects of conception and assent in general and not only second-order concepts, the central role of the division generated an extended debate about the subject matter of logic (El-Rouayheb, *Post-Avicennan Logicians*).

Moreover, what we understand by “knowledge” on this account of knowledge surely is a conception. So how do we acquire that conception? Conceptions are acquired by definitions – but “all knowledge is either conception or assent” is hardly a definition. One fundamental question for the later tradition was: How do we, on this account, define knowledge? Rāzī thought we couldn’t and was attacked by Kātibī (Kātibī, *As’ilat*, 18.3-10). Whether definable or not, what can we say about knowledge? Does it belong the Aristotelian category of quality or relation? These questions in foundational epistemology generated heated discussions in early postclassical Islamic philosophy (see Griffel, *Formation*, 373-383).

However, the primary purpose of the division of knowledge arguably was not so much to explain what knowledge is, but to undergird an epistemological theory of how we come to possess it. The distinction between acquired and primitive conceptions and assents was needed to

block the infinite regress that arises if we assume that all knowledge is inferential. But where do primitive conceptions and assents come from? Rāzī thought we cannot acquire conceptions by definitions, because whenever we give a definition, we must already know what we are defining (Griffel, *Formation*, 341). In the ensuing tradition, versions of Meno’s paradox were extensively discussed. Moreover, if there is a type of immediate assent, how is knowledge of a syllogism’s conclusion not identical with knowledge of its premises? Discussions on versions of Carroll’s paradox dealing with the nature of inference and implication became likewise widely discussed (see Klinger, *Forms of Carroll’s Paradox*).

The fundamental division of all knowledge into conception and assent – as imprecise or even fraud as it might have been – spawned discussions on a range of foundational issues in logic and epistemology that sometimes could spill over to adjacent disciplines like theology (*kalām*), jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), or semantics-rhetoric (*balāgha*). While it is important to note this fact to encourage further research on these issues, it is impossible to discuss these developments here. Rather, I want to focus on the emergence of a remarkable subgenre of philosophical writing that does not primarily deal with those questions, but rather with the logical consistency of the division of knowledge itself.

III Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rāzī al-Taḥṭānī’s *al-Risāla al-ma‘mūla fī l-taṣawwur wa-l-taṣdīq*

Once most philosophical *summae* started with some version of the sentence “All knowledge is either conception or assent”, virtually all authors of logical works engaged with this and related issues as raised by Rāzī and Khūnajī, usually in commentaries and glosses not only on these introductions, but also on the new handbooks of logic by Najm al-Dīn al-Kātibī (d. 1276), Sirāj al-Dīn al-Urmawī (d. 1283), and others.

In the Arabic logical tradition monographic works on specific topics are exceedingly rare.

Hence it is all the more remarkable that in the 14th century Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rāzī al-Taḥṭānī (d. 1365) wrote a substantial treatise (40 pages in Sharī‘atī’s edition) exclusively dedicated to clarifying the distinction between conceptions and assents.

Problems With the Distinction

A likely motivation for Taḥṭānī to dedicate an entire treatise to the division of knowledge into conception and assent would have been the fact that different authors had spelled out the distinction in different ways. Moreover, as the distinction had become so fundamental, there must have been a sense not only that it was important to get it right, but also that it needed to satisfy the very requirements of the theory of knowledge encapsulated by it.

Several logicians and philosophers of the generation following Rāzī and Khūnajī raised problems about the formal consistency of the division of knowledge. Already in the early second half of the 13th century Kātibī voiced serious doubts. In his commentaries on Rāzī’s *Mulakhkhaṣ* and Khūnajī’s *Kashf* he criticizes three accounts of the division.⁸ As these three accounts came to be standardly discussed in the later tradition, it is worth laying them out:

[Insert Table 1]

Table 1. Three different accounts of the distinction between conception and assent.

According to Kātibī, none of the accounts as they stand is logically consistent. Consider the sense of the sentence:

All knowledge is either conception or assent.

⁸ Neither text has been edited. I summarize from *MS Istanbul: Süleymaniye Carullah 1417*, fol. 2r1f (*Sharḥ Kashf*) and *MS Leiden: Universiteitsbibliotheek Or. 36*, fol. 2r23f. (*Munaṣṣaṣ*).

The sentence expresses a disjunction intended and understood to be exclusive. It may be paraphrased: for any x, if x is knowledge, then x is either a conception (and not an assent), or x is an assent (and not a conception). However, following Avicenna it was widely agreed that you cannot have knowledge in the form of an assent if you do not have any conceptions; but you can very well have knowledge in the form of a conception without an assent. If that is the case and the fundamental distinction is an exclusive disjunction, according to Kātibī none of the existing accounts of the division make the sentence come out true.

First of all, on accounts II and III the notion of “conception” is included in the definition of “assent”. Hence, the form of the quiddity that occurs in our minds when we understand the respective definitions of assent includes the form of the quiddity of conception. But there can be no exclusive disjunction between two sets one of which is a subset of the other. As an exclusive disjunction, “all giraffes are either females or ungulates” is simply false, because what this means is that no giraffe that is an ungulate can also be female. But all giraffes are ungulates, and some of them are of course female.

Moreover, if one defines conception with reference to the absence of judgment as Khūnajī had done, and conception is part of the definition of assent (II) or a condition for it (III), then the absence of judgment would be part of, or a condition for, assent. If you replace “conception” in the definition of assent by its own definition, you get nonsense:

Assent is perception without judgment accompanied by judgment.

Only the first account (I) seems to escape this conundrum. Here, neither of the disjuncts is defined in terms of the other and the disjunction can be exclusive. However, if you equate assent with judgment, the two should be interchangeable. But

All knowledge is either conception or judgment

seems to exclude precisely those cases where a conception is judged. For it implies that if knowledge is a judgment, it cannot be a conception. But surely it is conceptions that are judged! The same problem arises: you need to define judgment without recourse to “conception”.

Defending the idea that assent is the same as judgment required sharpening the notion of “judgment” in such a way that it could be clearly distinguished from conceptions while still allowing for conceptions to be the objects of judgments. This, I argue, was one of the main concerns of the ensuing literature on the division of knowledge.

Taḥṭānī’s Solution

In his *Epistle Dealing with Conception and Assent* Taḥṭānī engages widely with previous authors and extensively criticizes accounts I-III. He rejects all of them in favour of his own proposal (IV), for which he introduces a new notion that he equates with assent. This notion – *idh ‘ān* or acknowledgement – is supposed to avoid the kinds of problems Kātibī had raised.

To appreciate the solution offered by Taḥṭānī it is important to consider a parallel debate on the form of the proposition to which he made an important contribution (see El-Rouayheb, *Does a Proposition*). Taḥṭānī argued that a proposition has in fact four parts, not three as was generally assumed: the subject, the predicate, the relation (*nisba*) between them, and – as an additional element – the judgment. Even though on the level of language there are only three elements (S is P) expressed to signify a proposition, Taḥṭānī claimed that the copula signifies in fact two distinct things.⁹ It primarily signifies the judgment, that is: the relation between subject

⁹ Nominal sentences, by which present-tense propositions are most naturally expressed in Arabic, have of course only two parts. But at this point it was widely agreed that the copula ought to be expressed to reflect the logical structure of a proposition. The semantic role of the copula was the subject of intense

and predicate that is asserted. But it also signifies, by implication, the relation between subject and predicate that occurs or fails to occur (Taḥṭānī, *Lawāmi*’, II 17.4–19.2).

In cases of doubt, for example when you are not sure whether whales are mammals, the latter relation is realized, because *whale* and *mammal* are being related. However, the judgment-relation is not realized, which shows that the two are distinct. For Taḥṭānī, the copula signifies the relation that you entertain when you are in doubt about whether whales are mammals, and at the same time the judgment you make when you say that they are. But on a conceptual level, Taḥṭānī thinks there must be a clear separation between the two, that is: between judgeable content and the actual judgment. This was a first step in sharpening the notion of “judgment”.

The solution Taḥṭānī presents at the end of his *Epistle* builds on his argument for a quadripartite structure of propositions:

Now you know that assent is the expression of the fact that [a conception] obtains in the mind that the relation (*nisba*) occurs in actual fact, or else that it fails to so occur – which is the same as acknowledgment (*idh’ān*) and belief – this is what they call judgment. But terminology does not matter here.

The truth is what we transmitted from the Master [Avicenna], for anything that occurs in the mind are exclusively either forms of quiddities, which are conceptions; or acknowledgements (*idh’ān*), espousals, or beliefs in their correspondence [with reality], which are assents. But an acknowledgment insofar as it occurs in the mind is also a conception, except that it has the special property of being, inasmuch as it is an acknowledgment of something other than itself, an assent. (Taḥṭānī, *Risālatān*, 133.3-10)

Assent is the expression of the fact that a conception obtains in the mind acknowledging that the predicative relation in fact occurs. That fact is the same as the judgment-relation, but distinct

philosophical debate in the Arabic tradition. On Taḥṭānī’s role in these discussions see Klinger, *A New Take*, and on the general history Klinger, *Being Another Way*.

from the predicative relation. To mark this, Taḥṭānī introduces a new term, *idh ‘ān*, which I translate as “acknowledgment”, but which literally means that one readily grants something. Even though this is arguably not what Avicenna said (Avicenna does not use “*idh ‘ān*”), Taḥṭānī ascribes his own position to the Master.

Taḥṭānī insists that an assent is in fact primarily a conception, namely of the occurrence of the predicative relation in reality. It is an assent only insofar as that conception is of something other than itself. Whereas the object of the conception *giraffe* is a giraffe, the object of the conception acknowledging that giraffes are ungulates is the relation between *giraffe* and *ungulate* that is determined by its relata but distinct from them.

This account equates the notions of “assent” and “acknowledgment” in such a way that it can arguably avoid Kātibī’s objections. For on this account all objects of knowledge are conceptions which are defined by features independent of one another. Some conceptions have quiddities as their objects, while all others have judgment-relations as their objects. To differentiate the two, the latter are distinguished as assents. However, Taḥṭānī’s account is problematic for at least three reasons.

First, while it improves on previous accounts by clearly distinguishing judgment from judgeable content, it introduces a second relation in addition to the predicative relation between subject and predicate. But is the judgment-relation really distinct from the predicative relation? One might want to say that we just assert the judgeable content we understand from the predicative relation expressed by a proposition.

Second, if judgment is explained as acknowledgement and that acknowledgement is itself a conception, does Taḥṭānī succeed in giving a satisfactory interpretation of conception and

assent that avoids Kātibī's worries? If ultimately all knowledge is conception, why would you say "All knowledge is either conception or assent"?

Third, if assent is the acknowledgment that a relation obtains in actual fact, what about negations? When I say

Four is not a prime number

I do not acknowledge that a relation between "four" and "prime number" obtains – on the contrary, I deny it. But surely this denial must count as knowledge. Taḥṭānī's account would either have to include a third kind of knowledge (in which case "all knowledge is either conception or assent" would not be true), or else explain how one can assent to negations.

IV The Later Tradition

With Taḥṭānī's work began a tradition of writing either independent treatises or lengthy commentaries and glosses specifically on this topic. This tradition continued well into the 19th century and for the most part still awaits study:¹⁰

[Insert Table 2]

Table 2. Major works dedicated to conception and assent. ¹¹

Pending the edition of further texts, I shall here briefly discuss the contributions of Jurjānī, Mullā Ṣadra, and Mīr Zāhid Harawī.

¹⁰ On 13th century discussions see the chapter on Conception and Assent in Adamson, Klinger et al., *The Heirs*.

¹¹ There are more such works that we know of (unedited), and likely even more that we don't. Sharī'atī lists 24 such treatises (Taḥṭānī, *Risālatān*, 14-17).

Jurjānī

If Taḥṭānī was the most influential logical commentator of the 14th century, al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī (d. 1413) took over that role around the turn of the 15th century. He wrote extensive glosses on Taḥṭānī's great commentaries that together became staples of advanced logical studies in madrasa curricula for centuries to come. Recently, two short treatises by Jurjānī have been edited for the first time: the *Epistle Verifying the Meaning of Particles* (Aktaş, Seyyid Şerîf) and the *Epistle on the Division of Knowledge* (Özturan, On Sayyid). Together, they throw light on Jurjānī's contribution to the debate: he addresses the first problem I have raised regarding Taḥṭānī's account. While he accepts the notion of “acknowledgement” developed by Taḥṭānī and wants to safeguard the distinction between judgment and judgeable content, he rejects the idea that there is a judgment-relation distinct from the predicative relation expressed by a proposition.

In his *Epistle Verifying the Meaning of Particles* Jurjānī explains the relation between a conception and its object by using a simile:

Know that the relation between mental perception and its perceptible objects is like the relation between eyesight and its visible objects. If you look into a mirror, you see an image in it. Now there are two possible situations for you. First: You are paying attention to that image, intentionally observing it, and thus turning the mirror into a tool for seeing [the image]. It will not escape your notice that it is a mirror, even if you are seeing it in this way. But it is not [a mirror] inasmuch as you believe that you judge it to be [so] and turn your attention to its properties. Second: You turn your attention to the mirror itself and you intentionally look at it, such that it is appropriate for you to make a judgment concerning it. In this case you observe the image only in a secondary way because your attention is not directed towards it. (Aktaş, Seyyid Şerîf, 83.3-9)

The mirror here stands for what in Taḥṭānī was the predicative relation. Jurjānī's point is that that relation is in fact all there is – there is no distinct judgment-relation. This is because the same relation can be an object of both conception and of assent, depending on how you look at it.

If you look at the relation between subject and predicate in the way you observe an image in a mirror, you just *use* that relation to form a conception of, let us say, what it would mean for giraffes to be ungulates. However, you may look at the very same relation, not as a tool to entertain a state of affairs in your mind, but with a view to what the properties of that relation are. Just as the mirror may be dirty, the relation may have properties that you can judge. One such property could be that the relation occurs in actual fact. If you form a conception of that, you can judge that the state of affairs entertained in your mind is the case. On this account the same relation is first an object of conception and then, from a different perspective, the object of assent.

Jurjānī's *Epistle on the Division of Knowledge* is much shorter than Taḥṭānī's (a mere 6 pages in Özturan's edition), but it exhibits a similar structure. Like Taḥṭānī, Jurjānī classifies past accounts of the division of knowledge into four schools of thought, subjects them to his own critique, and defends Taḥṭānī's (IV) as the correct one, even though with a twist:

[The division is on this account] flawless, because each of its parts is in itself independently specifiable. For "conception" is [defined] regardless of whether it is conjoined with judgment or not. If it is an acquired [conception] it is attained by means of an explanatory phrase; if an assent is acquired, then it is attained by means of an argument – no matter whether the conceptions [involved] have been attained by an explanatory phrase or not. This division [so understood] is by its very essence conducive to its ultimate goal, namely to [reflect] the division of what is acquired in the theoretical sciences: cognitions and proofs. This is the truth, for the judgment is in reality [both] an acknowledgement (*idh'ān*) and a perception (*idrāk*), as is confirmed by intuition upon sincere deliberation. (Özturan, *On Sayyid*, 120.11-15)

If correctly understood, the division of knowledge on this account does not run into the problems pointed out by Kātibī, for each class of the division can be specified without recourse to notions that are required to specify the other class. Conceptions are mental perceptions *tout court*,

whereas assents are mental perceptions of an obtaining relation, which is tantamount to judgment.

However, most importantly, Jurjānī claims that intuition shows us clearly that judgment is both a mental perception and an acknowledgment (he uses *idh ‘ān*, just like Taḥṭānī). If we apply his mirror analogy to this statement, we get a similar picture to Taḥṭānī’s account, except that there is only one relation that can however be considered in one of two ways. Either it is used as a tool to form a conception of a state of affairs that is merely entertained (and would allow for doubt), or it is itself the object of a mental perception, i.e., a conception, that is then acknowledged to occur in actual fact. While Jurjānī can still distinguish between judgeable content and judgment, he need not suppose that assent is a judgment-relation distinct from the predicative relation. He does not, however, give a satisfactory answer to the second problem I raised: If all knowledge is ultimately conception, why do we need to say “all knowledge is either conception or assent”? Mullā Ṣadra did address that question.

Mullā Ṣadra

Mullā Ṣadra (d. 1635?), the great 17th century Persian philosopher who synthesized Avicennan philosophy with the Illuminationist philosophy of Shahab al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191), wrote another substantial *Epistle on Conception and Assent*. Even though relying heavily on Taḥṭānī’s work, he develops his own position and at times criticizes his predecessor.

One point of criticism concerns the correct understanding of the exclusive disjunction. In Mullā Ṣadra’s view it is impossible to define a concept of one part of a division by using concepts from its other part (Ṣadra, *Risalatān*, 54). That disqualifies accounts II and III, and poses problems for accounts I and IV, depending how precisely the notion of “judgment” or

“acknowledgment” is spelled out. However, Mullā Ṣadra’s strategy is not primarily to refine the notion of “assent”, but to cast new light on the nature of the distinction itself.

He argues that the division of knowledge is an Aristotelian division of a generic concept (“knowledge”) into its *infimae species* (“conception” and “assent”) (see Lameer, *Conception*, 45). While on the conceptual level it is not permissible to define one species in terms of instances belonging to the other, there is no problem with the fact that an actually existing instance of one part of the division should depend on the existence of an instance belonging to the other part (Ṣadra, *Risalatān*, 81). For example, while “human” as a concept is defined by “rational animal”, the actual existence of humans depends on the existence of individuals – but those individuals are not part of the definition of “human”. Likewise, an actual assent may depend for its occurrence on the actual existence of a conception without therefore implying that the definition of “assent” need include individual conceptions (Ṣadra, *Risalatān*, 87; cf. Lameer, *Conception*, 69-70).

In that case, Mullā Ṣadra needs to define “assent” without recourse to the notion of “conception”. But this has proven difficult, and he does not, in fact, do that. Instead, he offers a broader reconceptualization of the division of knowledge that notably includes and develops elements of Illuminationist philosophy.¹² Suffice it here to point out how he thinks he can overcome the second problem I raised. He argues that in one sense, namely when considered as accidents occurring to the souls of individual knowers, all knowledge is conception (Ṣadra, *Risalatān*, 75). In that sense, assents are a subset of conceptions that are distinguished by the fact that they entail judgment. However, in another sense, namely in the sense of the Aristotelian division mentioned above, assents are the counterpart of conceptions (Ṣadra, *Risalatān*, 68-69).

¹² For a comprehensive analysis of Mullā Ṣadra’s account, see Lameer, *Conception*, 36-63.

Knowledge, or conception *tout court*, is the genus under which conception and assent are counterparts as the *infimae species* of that division.

Describing knowledge in the first sense, Mullā Ṣadra distinguishes three elements required for an actual assent to occur (Ṣadra, *Risalatān*, 59-60): First, there must occur the judgment itself, which is an act of the soul affirming or denying a conception. Judgment in that sense does however not by itself count as knowledge. This is simply because it is neither a conception nor an assent (neither of which are acts of the soul). Second, there must occur the conception of that judgment, which is not an assent either but rather an instance of the opposing *infima species*, i.e. of conceptions. It is a conception of what the affirmation or denial means, without therefore eliciting acknowledgement. For there is a third element required: the conception that entails this acknowledgment. Being a conception, it does count as an instance of knowledge. The object of this knowledge, i.e., the judgment, in turn, represents an instance of assent. The conception of the judgment is thus the object of knowledge and at the same time an instance of knowledge. Hence, the conception insofar as it is a conception regardless of its object is an instance of the species “conception”. Insofar as it is a conception entailing acknowledgment of the judgment, it is an assent.

Mullā Ṣadra’s distinction between the conceptual level on which definitions operate and the level of actual knowledge in the form of conceptions and assents that occur to the souls of individual knowers does avoid the problem of knowing negative propositions. Given that a judgment is defined as an act of the soul by which something is either affirmed or denied, and that it is only the conception of that judgment that plays a role in an actual assent, one can know negative propositions simply by acknowledging the conception of a negative judgment. However, it remains questionable whether Mullā Ṣadra would have persuaded Kātibī. For even

on this more sophisticated account, he cannot avoid distinguishing between the “conception regardless of its object [i.e. judgment]” and the “conception entailing acknowledgment of the judgment” (Şadra, *Risalatān*, 60; cf. Lameer, *Conception*, 51). Kātibī’s argument against account III would work here, too.

Harawī’s Commentary

Mīr Zāhid Harawī (d. 1689/90) is a comparatively little-known figure. He was active at the court of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1659-1707) and later in Kabul where he died (El-Rouayheb, *The Development*, 180). Besides a gloss on Jalāl al-Dīn al-Dawānī’s (d. 1502) commentary on the *Tahdhīb al-manṭiq*, he wrote a commentary together with an auto-gloss on Taḥṭānī’s treatise on conception and assent (together close to 300 pages in Sharī‘atī’s edition). This substantial body of work includes detailed discussions of topics like God’s knowledge of particulars, the form of propositions, infinity, or the nature of number, and remains largely unexplored. The commentary elicited numerous glosses of which I have only listed three of the more influential ones. Curiously, even though Harawī engaged with a wide range of philosophers up to his time, he seems not to have been aware of Mullā Şadra’s treatise (cf. El-Rouayheb, *The Development*, 181). Nonetheless, Harawī likewise attempted to give an account that would avoid the consequence that assent is simply a subtype of conception.

He argues that when we look closely at our notion of knowledge, we must distinguish between the conception, which is a form occurring to the mind, and the cognitive state (*ḥāla idrākiyya*) that we are in when the form is actually present in our mind (Harawī, *Sharḥ*, 120). What we really mean by knowledge is the cognitive state that we pass into once a form becomes present to our mind. When we call a conception “knowledge”, this is merely an accidental predication, true only in virtue of the fact that the presence of the form causes the cognitive

state.¹³ This way, we no longer have to assume (as had Mullā Ṣadra, but also Jurjānī and after him Dawānī) that knowledge and the object of knowledge are identical, namely one and the same conception as a form being present in the mind. While the object of knowledge is the form present in the mind, knowledge itself is a cognitive state. And it is of this cognitive state only that we say that it is either a conception or an assent.

An assent, then, is for Harawī a cognitive state that results from a conception and has the property that it carries an acknowledging attitude (*kayfiyya idh 'āniyya*). Conversely, a conception is a cognitive state that lacks that property (Harawī, *Sharḥ*, 120-21). Thus, Harawī espouses a modified version of account III, but can arguably avoid Katibī's criticism because he is not *defining* conception and assent in terms of one another. He defines knowledge as a cognitive state. Such state may have distinct properties depending on whether what is prompting it allows for acknowledgment or not. On this account we may rephrase the distinction as "all knowledge is a cognitive state prompted by the presence to the mind of a form that either allows for an acknowledging attitude or not". This interpretation is a far more satisfactory response to Kātibī's worries.

Conclusion

In the period from Fārābī to Avicenna, Islamic philosophers turned a peripheral Aristotelian distinction into a fundamental division of knowledge into two types: conception and assent. This distinction was understood to be exhaustive and irreducible and served to underpin both logical and epistemological theory.

¹³ This idea seems to be original to Harawī and he argues for it at length also in his gloss on Dawānī's commentary on the *Tahdhīb al-mantiq*, see El-Rrouayheb, *The Development*, 181-82)

The first two of the “later logicians”, Rāzī and Khūnajī cemented the fundamental character of this division in the introductions to their most influential works on logic. For both, the division of knowledge informed the structure of logic as well as the arguments for why it is needed for all sciences. Rāzī’s bipartition of logic into “conceptology” and “assentology” reflects the structure of that division. Khūnajī argued for a more encompassing view on the subject matter of logic, including the objects of all conception and assent. By making the division of all knowledge into conceptions and assents central to logical and epistemological theory, both authors raised several issues like the nature and definability of knowledge itself, Meno’s and Carroll’s paradox, or the paradox of the “absolutely unknown”, or the question of the subject matter of logic itself, that reverberated with philosophers for centuries.

However, given its central importance for philosophy, it was the precise nature of the division of knowledge that came under scrutiny. The distinction had been formulated in different ways, but all seemed to run into similar problems. “All knowledge is either conception or assent” was understood as an exclusive disjunction, but to define one notion one had to have recourse to the other. This generated a remarkable tradition of philosophical writings dedicated to discussing the logical consistency of the division that continued into the 19th century.

Informed by parallel debates on the form of the proposition, the first independent treatise on the topic by Taḥṭānī proposed to distinguish between conceptions of a quiddity and conceptions of a judgment-relation. This proposal was based on a clear separation between judgeable content and the actual judgment. Jurjānī’s treatise on the topic developed that idea by arguing that the objects of conception and assent need not be distinct. Neither proposal provided a satisfactory response to the problem of how to define conception and assent independently of one another: for both all knowledge is ultimately conception. Mullā Ṣadra attempted to explain

the nature of the distinction by recasting it as an Aristotelian distinction with knowledge as a *genus* and conception and assent as its *infimae species*. It was however only with Harawī's distinction between conceptions and the cognitive state they cause that a satisfactory response seemed possible.

The tradition of philosophical engagement with this division of knowledge did not end with Harawī. On the contrary, the increasingly rich tradition of philosophical discussions on notions of knowledge, judgment, assent, and truth prompted by a fundamental division of knowledge seems to have become even more important after that and is now in clearer view to explore.

This work was supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) as part of the research project 'The Heirs of Avicenna: Philosophy in the Islamic East from the 12th to the 13th Century' under Grant number 273594864, directed by Prof. Dr. Peter Adamson, Lehrstuhl VI für spätantike und arabische Philosophie, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. I thank Peter for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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Disclosure Statement

The author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.

Table 1. Three different accounts of the distinction between conception and assent.

Account	Attributed to	Conception	Assent
I	The ancients (<i>qudamā</i> '), Fārābī, Avicenna?	Form of a quiddity in the mind	= judgment (<i>ḥukm</i>)
II	Rāzī	Simple conception	Compound conception consisting of: conception of the subject + conception of the predicate + conception of the truth of the judgment
III	Khūnajī (and Urmawī), the new logicians (<i>muta'akhkhirūn</i>)	Perception (<i>idrāk</i>) without judgment	Conception accompanied by judgment

Table 2. Major works dedicated to conception and assent.

Author	Title	Edition/Translation
Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rāzī al-Taḥṭānī (d. 1365)	<i>al-Risāla al-ma'mūla fī l-taṣawwur wa-l-taṣdīq</i> (Epistle Dealing with Conception and Assent)	Ed. Sharī'atī
al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī (d. 1413)	<i>Risāla fī taqṣīm al-'ilm</i> (Epistle on the Division of Knowledge)	Ed. Özturan
Jalāl al-Dīn al-Dawānī (d. 1502)	<i>Risāla fī muṭabaqāt al-taṣawwurāt</i> (Epistle on the Correspondence of Conceptions)	
Shams al-Dīn al-Khafri (d. 1535/6)	<i>Risāla fī l-qaḍiyya wa-l-taṣdīq</i> (Epistle on Proposition and Assent)	
‘Iṣām al-Dīn al-Isfarāyīnī (d. 1536/7)	<i>Risāla fī qawlihim "al-taṣawwur lā naqīd lahu"</i> (Epistle on Their Claim That Conceptions Have No Contradictories)	
Aḥmed Ṭaṣköprüzāde (d. 1561)	<i>Ghāyat al-taḥqīq wa-nihāyat al-taḍqīq fī taqṣīm al-'ilm ilā l-taṣawwur wa-l-taṣdīq</i> (The Ultimate Verification and the Utmost Exactitude in Dividing Knowledge into Conception and Assent)	
Mīr Damād (d. 1631)	<i>Ta'liqat 'alā l-baḥṭh 'an iktisāb al-taṣdīq min al-taṣawwur wa bi-l-'aks li-l-Dawānī</i> (Glosses on Dawānī's Inquiry Concerning the Acquisition of Assents from Conceptions and Vice-Versa)	
Mullā Ṣadra (d. 1635?)	<i>Risāla fī l-taṣawwur wa-l-taṣdīq</i> (Epistle on Conception and Assent)	Ed. Sharī'atī Tr. Lameer
Mīr Zāhid Harawī (d. 1689/90)	<i>Šarḥ al-Risāla al-ma'mūla fī l-taṣawwur wa-l-taṣdīq</i> (Commentary on the Epistle Dealing with Conception and Assent)	Ed. Sharī'atī
	<i>Ta'liqāt 'alā al-Risāla al-ma'mūla fī l-taṣawwur wa-l-taṣdīq</i> (Glosses on the Epistle Dealing with Conception and Assent)	Ed. Sharī'atī
Muḥibullāh Bihārī (d. 1707)	Glosses on Mīr Zāhid Harawī's Commentary	
Mullā Ḥasan Lakhnawī (d. 1784)	Glosses on Mīr Zāhid Harawī's Commentary	

