



On Doubt and Certainty

Tariq Ashfaq

*My Heart – my battlefield of life!
The armies of doubts, the
Steadfastness of Certainty!
Muhammad Iqbal*

*Rejecting doubt and darkness stage
by stage
His former journey he performs
again,
Till perfect manhood
he at lengths attains.
Mahmud Shabistari*

*Take thou from thine ears
the cotton-wood of doubt.
Mahmud Shabistari*

We have translated here some excerpts from *The Fountainhead of Wisdom* (*uyun al-maarif*) by Shah Wahhaj al-Din Qalandar of the Indian sub-continent. The theme discussed herein deals with the problem of doubt (*shak*) faced by a pilgrim during his spiritual journey. Even doubt can serve a positive purpose because nothing can be discarded in the spiritual path. The Shah recommends doubt, which he equates with the whisper of Satan, as a spiritual method.¹ The Shah further introduces the key-concept of pure Doubt which occurs, so to speak, in the mind of God in his aspect of pure Transcendence. As we are going to see further, the answer to the problem of creation of the world also lies in the mystery of pure Doubt.

The second part of the discourse takes up the question of certainty (*yaqin*) which is not unrelated to the problem of doubt and which cannot be treated separately in an esoteric exposition.

¹ In respect of doubt as a spiritual method, Mohammad Hasan Askari, a Pakistani philosopher has this to say: "The perfection of faith lies in the assimilation of big doubts."

On Doubt and Certainty

The symbolism of the staff of Moses is employed as referring to reaching the highest degree of certainty. At this level it is perfectly legitimate to say that 'faith can move mountains'.

*Let this heart thou gavest me
overflow with certainty.
Mohammad Iqbal*

The reality of certainty lies in the conception of doubt. To be in a state of doubt is to be uncertain about things or beings. The moment one comes across a doubt about something the existence of the latter is already established, because if the object of doubt were inexistent it could not simply be doubted. In other words, the existence of a thing precedes the act of doubting it. Is it possible to doubt nothingness or non-being (*adam*)? Consequently, doubt itself paves the way for certainty about the existence of a thing.

For Sufis the evil whispers (*waswasa shaytani*) of Satan constitute doubt, which can be positively utilized so as to attain certainty. In other words, doubt can bear the fruits of certainty, that is, utilizing doubt in the service of certainty will render the ruses of Satan impotent. For this reason the Koran addressed to the Satan in the following manner: *You could not be able to rule over my servants.*

The mystery of doubt is remarkably eminent. The cause of universal manifestation is nothing other than doubt, which arose as it were in the mind of the divine Principle. The Principle in its pure Independence (*sarafat istighna*) to all beings involves Itself with the 'Transcendence within Transcendence' (*tanzih fi tanzih*) so much so that It reaches the highest point of intensity of Transcendence which consequently produces pure Doubt in the mind of the Principle as to its Essence (*dhat*). The pure Doubt is, so to say, a Mole² or a Dot or a Point of Unity on the Face of the Principle meaning thereby the reality of Immanence (*tashbih*) which is heretofore contained in the Absolute Transcendence (*tanzih mahd*).

The Immanence caused a doubt in the mind of the Principle so that It desired to know Itself which resulted into the production of universal manifestation. A Prophetic tradition declares: *I was a Treasure but was not known, so I loved to be known; I created the creatures and made Myself known to them, so they came to know Me.*

The question, 'Am I not your Lord?'³ was asked by God to each of the Archetypes or Possibilities (*ayan thabita*) so that the pure Doubt was resolved after a reply was made in the affirmative: *They said, "Yes we bear witness."*

The reply was, however, not sufficient as the detailed confirmation (*tasdiq tafsili*) has not yet been sought, that is, in a differentiated mode. The need for seeking confirmation in the full, led to the creation of the world constituting/comprising/comprehending all the

² The mole signifies a dark spot on a white face. The divine Essence (*dhat*) also symbolizes darkness.

³ The question itself implies the occurrence of doubt in God's Mind.

On Doubt and Certainty

degrees of existence ending up with the corporeal manifestation. So, the cause of creation was pure Doubt by means of which the divine Mind attained certainty.

In certainty his soul finds rest.

Mahmud Shabistari

As the staff of Moses swallowed miraculously all the serpents, which added nothing more to it, created by the magicians of Pharaoh, so certainty is able to consume/defuse all our vain thoughts. The Koran relates to us the story of Moses in the following manner:

Moses said to them: Throw what you are going to throw!

Then they threw down their cords and their staves and said: By Pharaoh's might, lo!

We verily are the winners.

Then Moses threw his staff and lo! it swallowed that which they did falsely show.

And the wizards were flung prostrate,

Crying: we believe in the Lord of the worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron.

There is a subtle connection between certainty and conjecture (*zann*). The Prophetic tradition declares: *I am, what my servant conjectures about me.*⁴

Good conjecture or good faith (*husn zann*) in times of sorrow vis-à-vis the Real (*haqq*) may help one attain progress from one station to another as the Real is never lacking in certitude. The Real is ever certitudinal, in what ever state one remembers or conjectures about Him. What seems to be a conjecture from an individual stand point is, in fact, a certainty from the point of view of the Real.

Certainty, being the point of arrival, is achieved through doubt which arises in order that certainty can be reached. Before one reaches certainty, doubt tends to increase until it is finally overcome. Keeping in view the final goal, the pilgrim uses doubt and conjecture as a method. Conjecture produces knowledge which ends up with certainty. Therefore, knowledge is superior to conjecture but inferior to certainty.

Just as conjecture brings forth thought, so certainty generates unveiling or witnessing (*shuhud*). One can 'know' through conjecture but one can 'see' through witnessing or certainty.

There are three degrees of certainty: Lore of certainty (*ilm al-yaqin*); Eye of certainty (*ayn al-yaqin*); and Truth of certainty (*haq al-yaqin*).

The first one implies rational and traditional knowledge. For example, knowledge of one's brother as brother. The second one signifies a further deepening of one's Knowledge. To know a person or a thing with the 'eye' (*ayn*) of the known is to know with the Eye of certainty. For example, to have knowledge of one's brother as he actually

⁴ Perhaps Aristotle was referring to the same idea when he said: Nothing can be known except in the mode of the Knower.

On Doubt and Certainty

knows himself. In other words, to know one's brother from the point of view of brother. The last one points to the knowledge of the identity (*ayniyya*) of the knower and the known. At this stage knowing and being are one.

As the Real, to put it differently, sees an object in all Its comprehensiveness and essential reality, so also does the seeker perceives an object on becoming the Real.

The mode of Truth of certainty is incomparably subtler than that of Eye of certainty. The moment the seer identifies himself with the thing seen, he is said to have attained the highest degree of certainty, that is, Truth of certainty. From this station of absolute certainty, Ali ibn Abi Talib is said to have spoken these words: *Were the covering unveiled, I would not increase in certainty.*

Let us say that certainty neither increases nor decreases but by virtue of attributes (*sifat*) and actions (*afal*). The attributes and actions do not exist independently of the divine Essence (*dhat*) but are primordially contained in It. As long as the attributes are not seen to be contained by the Essence, they act as a veil (*hijab*) to It. From a universal point of view, nothing remains/exists but the Essence, which neither increases nor decreases. Analogously speaking, from the stand point of absolute certainty, nothing new comes into being.

The power of absolute certainty is immense. As a result, the adept acquires miraculous powers and acts freely (*tasarruf*). Now, he is able to work wonders and what ever he wishes to do, it actually happens. Due to the highest degree of certainty which Moses realized, his staff got transformed into a large snake which ate up all the serpents created by the magicians of the Pharaoh and a safe path was made into the river which Moses and his Companions trod with ease. Likewise, the fruits and effects of certainty are inexhaustible.

God Says in the Koran:

Keep worshipping your Lord until you gain certainty.