
AZIZUDDIN NASAFI'S VIEWS ON IRRATIONAL COGNITION

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Annotation

This article provides a comprehensive philosophical analysis of Azizuddin Nasafi's views on irrational (intuitive-mystical) cognition, a prominent 13th-century Central Asian Sufi thinker. Amidst the political and spiritual crisis following the Mongol invasion, Nasafi developed an integrative epistemological model defining the boundaries of theoretical reason ('aql) and presenting intuitive-mystical cognition (kashf, shuhud, ilham, and tajalli) as the highest stage of human knowledge. Analyzing his primary treatises-Kitab al-Insan al-Kamil, Zubdat al-Haqaiq, Bayan ut-Tanzil, and Maqsad al-Aqsa-the study demonstrates that Nasafi did not reject rationality; rather, he viewed reason as a necessary preliminary tool for understanding the material world. The paper explores the ontological mechanism of heart purification (tazkiya), the hierarchy of knowledge ('Ilm al-Yaqin, 'Ayn al-Yaqin, and Haqq al-Yaqin), direct divine knowledge ('Ilm al-Ladunni), and the synthesis of Sufi metaphysics with Illuminationist philosophy. Ultimately, Nasafi's epistemology serves as a harmonious bridge between rational logic and spiritual enlightenment, providing enduring insights into human perfection.

Keywords: Azizuddin Nasafi, Sufi Epistemology, Irrational Cognition, Intuitive Knowledge, Kashf and Shuhud, Insan al-Kamil, Zubdat al-Haqaiq, Bayan ut-Tanzil, Tazkiya, Illuminationism.

Introduction

Cognition, the subject and object of knowledge, and its core essence have always been among the most significant issues intriguing humanity since ancient times. In every era, human beings have strived to comprehend the nature of the world they inhabit, the surrounding reality, and the phenomena

occurring within it. Indeed, knowing and understanding the world reflects man's relationship to objective reality, thereby constructing objective truth. Undoubtedly, among the most debated, unresolved, and conflicting issues in Islamic thought are the concepts of God, His attributes, divine unity (tawhid), and spiritual gnosis (ma'rifat). At the very center of these intellectual inquiries lies the methodology of perceiving and knowing God, which generated diverse philosophical schools and fundamental questions. For instance: What methods should be employed to know God? Should we descend from God to created beings (deductive), or ascend from particular entities to universal Truth (inductive)? What guides us in this process-reason ('aql), argumentative deduction (istidlal), or is there another path beyond reason and logic? The search for answers to these questions brought theologians (kalam scholars), mystics (Sufis), and philosophers face-to-face, transforming this religious, philosophical, and mystical debate into a universal human problem. When analyzing the approaches of Sufi representatives on this matter, two distinct paths clearly emerge:

1. The path of reason and deduction (Exoteric / Rationalism)

2. The path of unveiling and contemplation (Esoteric / Irrationalism)

Islamic philosophers relied primarily on reason and deduction, employing an inductive approach from the particular to the general. Conversely, Sufis utilized a deductive methodology moving from the universal to the particular. In classical Sufism, gnosis (irfan), spiritual knowledge (ma'rifat), and the knowledge of God (ma'rifatullah) occupied a central position. In Al-Luma', authored by Abu Nasr al-Sarraj-one of the earliest figures of classical Sufism-the concepts of tawhid, ma'rifat, and 'arif (gnostic) were analyzed as foundational mystical notions. Similarly, Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi's At-Ta'arruf, Abdul Karim al-Qushayri's Risala al-Qushayriyya, and Ali Hujwiri's Kashf ul-Mahjub examined this subject through the interconnectedness of tawhid and ma'rifat. In Manazil al-Sa'irin ("Stations of the Wayfarers"), where Abdullah Ansari conceptualized the spiritual stations into ten stages and one hundred stations, the concept of ma'rifat was defined as an initial milestone in the "Nihayat" section.

As for Azizuddin Nasafi, he addressed irfan, ma'rifat, cognition, and ultimate truth as a distinct, specialized framework across almost all of his works. Nasafi's balanced and objective attitude toward these issues allows for

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comparisons even with modern philosophers. In his mystical teachings, sensory and rational perception are elaborated through an irfani (gnostic) style. A crucial element in Nasafi's perspective on how humans reach the ultimate Truth is that this process is not merely intellectual or rational. Man must actively polish and purify the mirror of his heart to receive knowledge. According to the mystic, even human effort alone is insufficient; the ultimate step depends on God, who bestows specific divine knowledge directly into the heart. This divine act of bestowing knowledge upon the Sufi undergoing spiritual travel (sair u suluk) is characterized by Nasafi as Divine Love ('ishq). Nasafi's mystical epistemology synthesizes the two poles of knowledge-the rational ('aqli) and the irrational (irfani)-around a single divine reality. Here, revelation (wahy) and tradition (naql) serve as criteria, reason operates as an instrument, and gnosis (irfan) stands as the ultimate objective. This system transforms human cognition from bounded logical deductions into infinite divine gnosis. In our view, Azizuddin Nasafi's epistemological framework exhibits a dualistic nature, as it clearly demonstrates the intrinsic interconnectedness between rational and irrational pathways of knowledge.

Azizuddin Nasafi's Sufi epistemology is not merely a collection of religious views, but a multi-layered, integral cognitive system. He presented a unique epistemological model that balances human consciousness (reason) and spiritual experience (unveiling/inspiration).

Furthermore, while traditional Sufis often held a negative stance toward philosophers due to their rigid analytical methods, Nasafi demonstrated an open-minded approach. In his works, Nasafi frequently acknowledged valid points in the arguments of both kalam theologians and philosophers, allocating space to their ideas. From this perspective, he did not harbor a hostile attitude toward philosophy. Moreover, Nasafi's views reflect not only the insights of a philosopher-mystic but also the empirical precision of a physician-scholar.

Azizuddin Nasafi's concept of irrational (intuitive-mystical) cognition holds a unique place in the history of 13th-century Transoxiana thought and Islamic philosophy. Living during a period of severe political and spiritual crisis following the Mongol invasion, Nasafi analyzed the boundaries of human potential in comprehending existence and Divine Truth. By outlining

the limits of classical kalam rationalism and philosophical logic, he proposed irrational cognition (kashf, shuhud, ilham, and tajalli) as the highest stage of epistemology. In his fundamental treatises-such as Kitab al-Insan al-Kamil, Zubdat al-Haqaiq, Bayan ut-Tanzil, and Maqsad al-Aqsa-irrational cognition is analyzed not as blind fanaticism or mere fantasy, but as a refined level of contemplation that begins where reason reaches its limits, realized through heart purification and metaphysical realization.

The starting point of Nasafi's epistemology begins with an objective evaluation of reason (theoretical reason) and its scope. He considers reason an essential tool for human beings to comprehend the physical world and exoteric laws. However, as emphasized in Zubdat al-Haqaiq, knowledge acquired through reason remains constrained within the boundaries of concepts, logical analogies, and discursive proofs (adilla and burhan). Nasafi likens logical-rational cognition to the light of a lamp, whereas irrational-mystical cognition is compared to the light of the sun. A lamp is necessary to guide one's path in the dark, but it cannot reveal the true colors or the complete landscape of reality. Therefore, reason falls short in perceiving metaphysical reality, the Divine Essence and Attributes, and the true ontological hierarchy; at this junction, irrational cognition-kashf (unveiling) and shuhud (witnessing)-comes into play.

In Kitab al-Insan al-Kamil, the thinker identifies the heart (the mirror of the heart) and the secret (sirr) as the primary organs of irrational perception. In Nasafi's doctrine, the heart acts as a delicate barzakh (isthmus) between reason and the spirit. When the heart is cleansed from worldly passions, animalistic qualities, and spiritual rust, it becomes capable of receiving Divine Light. Nasafi explains the mechanism of irrational cognition through the concepts of ishraq (illumination) and tajalli (epiphany). Once a person progresses beyond accumulating rational proofs and elevates his soul through self-purification (tazkiya) and spiritual discipline (riyada) to the state of contentment (reassured soul), direct metaphysical knowledge ('Ilm al-Ladunni) flows into his heart. This knowledge is not the result of discursive thinking or research, but is acquired through direct "vision" (shuhud) and "taste" (zawq).

In Bayan ut-Tanzil, the relationship between irrational and rational cognition is expressed through three epistemological stages:

1. 'Ilm al-Yaqin (Knowledge of Certainty): Knowledge attained through rational and traditional proofs, where an individual learns about things and phenomena from an external standpoint.

2. 'Ayn al-Yaqin (Eye of Certainty): The initial stage of irrational cognition, wherein a person directly observes Divine Light and Truth through the spiritual eye of the heart.

3. Haqq al-Yaqin (Truth of Certainty): The supreme level of irrational cognition, in which all veils between the knower ('alim) and the known (ma'lum) are completely lifted, and the human soul merges into Truth itself. Nasafi stresses that rationalism can only lead a human being to the first stage ('Ilm al-Yaqin), while the remaining two higher stages are attainable exclusively through the irrational-intuitive path.

In Maqсад al-Aqsa, the thinker analyzes the role of irrational cognition in achieving human perfection and societal harmony. According to Nasafi, scholars and philosophers who rely solely on reason frequently fall into disagreement and doubt, as logical proofs can always be challenged by counter-arguments. However, knowledge attained through irrational unveiling (kashf) leaves no room for doubt due to its direct, experiential nature (shuhudi). Creating a synthesis of Sufism and Illuminationist philosophy (Ishraqi), Nasafi interprets irrationalism not as an enemy of reason, but as its ultimate perfection and continuation. He identifies this irrational gnosis and spiritual cleansing as the core driving force leading humanity toward a "spiritual renaissance".

Continuing the conceptual and source-critical analysis of Nasafi's model reveals even deeper epistemological dimensions. In Nasafi's view, irrational cognition is not merely an isolated psychological state of the subject, but an ontological mechanism of light and information exchange between the physical world ('Alam al-Mulk) and the spiritual realm ('Alam al-Malakut). As noted in Zubdat al-Haqaiq, humans can evaluate physical attributes and spatiotemporal phenomena through sensory organs and logical deduction. However, the ultimate essence of existence—the metaphysical lights emanating from the Universal Intellect ('Aql-i Kull) and Supreme Spirit (Ruh-i A'zam)-transcends the constraints of time and space. Here, Nasafi enriches irrational cognition with the concepts of zawq (direct tasting) and wijdan (inner intuitive consciousness). A scholar may know conceptually

through rational proof that sugar is sweet, but this knowledge remains purely theoretical compared to the direct experience (zawq) of someone who actually tastes it.

In Kitab al-Insan al-Kamil, another essential distinction is drawn between Direct Divine Knowledge ('Ilm al-Ladunni) and Acquired Knowledge ('Ilm al-Kasbi). According to Nasafi, in acquired knowledge, human reasoning moves from external forms (surat) toward meaning (ma'na), making it susceptible to error and misinterpretation. In ladunni (irrational) knowledge, because the heart is connected directly to the Source of Meaning, the meaning itself shapes the form. As the mirror of the heart becomes clearer, knowledge manifests not as memorized rules from external sources, but as self-realization unveiled from within one's own inner essence.

In Bayan ut-Tanzil, Nasafi clarifies the place of irrational cognition within Islamic theology (kalam) through the balance between Revelation (Wahy) and Inspiration (Ilham). He defines revelation-exclusive to prophets-as the absolute, flawless, and highest degree of irrational cognition. Inspiration (ilham) and unveiling (kashf) granted to saints, mystics, and perfected individuals are continuations and reflections of that prophetic source. Nasafi emphasizes that any personal metaphysical experience obtained through irrational kashf must not contradict Sacred Law (Sharia) or sound reason ('aql-i salim). This stance demonstrates Nasafi's moderate, synthetic, and non-radical approach.

In Maqсад al-Aqsa, the thinker ties the ultimate pinnacle of irrational cognition to the stages of Annihilation (Fana')-the dissolving of selfhood in Divine Truth-and Subsistence (Baqa')-rebirth through Divine Attributes. For the mystic ('arif) who reaches this level, the boundaries between the rational and irrational vanish, as he contemplates all of existence as a unified, holistic system (Wujud-i Wahid). Following the devastation of the Mongol conquests, this concept served as a vital moral-philosophical foundation for restoring the human spirit and fostering inner peace within society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Azizuddin Nasafi's views on irrational cognition represent a fully realized philosophical framework with solid ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations rather than a simple

description of mystical states. By demonstrating the limitations of theoretical reason, Nasafi substantiated the boundless potential of human consciousness and the spirit, illuminating the path to Divine Truth through direct unveiling (kashf), witnessing (shuhud), and epiphany (tajalli). Today, this doctrine continues to serve as an important fundamental-philosophical source for enriching man's inner spiritual life and establishing a harmonious balance between rational thought and moral-spiritual values.

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