Martin Heidegger and Omar Khayyam on the Question of “Thereness” (Dasein)

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In comparing two philosophers who belong to two distinct philosophical traditions, one often runs the risk of superficiality. That is, by finding similarities, either conceptual or linguistic, one may conclude that the thinkers in question are advocating the same concepts. One may go further and ask, “So what if the two figures belonging to two different schools of thought agree with respect to one or a set of ideas?”

What distinguishes the present discussion from many others is that through an examination of the perspectives of Martin Heidegger and Omar Khayyam on the question of “thereness”, I hope to demonstrate the richness that one may arrive at by comparing the way the two philosophers struggled, ontologically speaking, to account for the “thereness” of the human condition. Khayyam, the Iranian mathematician, scientist and philosopher of the 11th CE, whose quatrains known as the “Ruba’iyyat” became a household word in 19th century Europe and America, is a unique figure in the annals of Islamic intellectual thought. In his philosophical treatises, Khayyam writes as a Muslim philosopher who is operating well within the Islamic religious universe, but as a poet he shifts to a more agnostic/atheistic perspective and advocates a different mode of being.

What makes Omar Khayyam different from many others who have made a similar intellectual journey is that he may have been operating simultaneously within two different ontological schemes. While the centerpiece of Khayyam’s concern remains the problem of being and being-in-the-world, he writes both as a philosopher and a poet. In his philosophical works, written in the tradition of the Peripatetics, Khayyam is a theist, but when he adopts the poetic mode of existence, an agnostic-atheist poet emerges who is pulled between two diametrically opposing perspectives on the “thereness” of man.

Heidegger’s struggle is with the very notion of being and not with one’s relation to it. He is not struggling with the proper ontological framework in order to explain a seemingly senseless existence. For Heidegger, telos is not required in order to dwell authentically; Khayyam the philosopher, however, is bewildered by whether dwelling authentically is possible without telos.

A treatment of Khayyam’s notion of “thereness” first, followed by an analysis of Heidegger’s notion reveals much about the trials and tribulations of these two figures and the strength and weaknesses of their views. Omar Khayyam was a restless Muslim, caught between the rationalistic tradition of the Peripatetics in the Islamic intellectual tradition and his own failure to make sense of a world for

which he could find no purpose. The irreconcilable nature of these two perspectives created a unique figure who had to rely on two distinct ontological frameworks to account for the place of man in the world. Khayyam, similarly to Heidegger, offered analysis and interpretation of the problem of Being as the most important and fundamental problem of philosophy. Unlike Heidegger, however, Khayyam relied on an Aristotelian and discursive approach and composed six philosophical treatises dedicated to a treatment of Being. They are:

1. On Being and necessity (Fi'l-kawn wa'l-taklif)
2. On the Necessity of Contradiction in the World, Determinism and Subsistence (Darurat al-ta'ād fi'l-ālam wa'l-jabr wa'l-baqā')
3. Treatise on Intellectual Illumination on the Subject of Universal Knowledge (Risālah di'ya' al-aqīf fi ma`adda' al-ilm al-kulliyī)
4. On the Knowledge of Universals of Existence (Dar 'ilm kulliyār-i wujūd)
5. Treatise on Being (Risālah fi'l-wujūd)
6. Treatise in Response to Three Questions (Al-jawāb 'an thulāth masā'ī)

As the above titles suggest, Khayyam is dealing with different traditional philosophical problems such as the theodicy, free will, and determinism, but, as he acknowledges, these problems are all modalities of the problem of Being. In his discursive approach to the problem of Being, Khayyam begins by classifying different types of beings, such as actual, abstract, accidental, and essential. In his Treatise on Being, having offered an explanation of various modalities of Being, Khayyam tells us in section six, “The doubt that has made them [philosophers] fall into perplexity lies in the most major and self-evident primary proposition for it can neither be verified nor falsified and thus it is obvious that there is no need to mention it and to discuss negating it or resolving it for that is foolish.”

In his work On Being and Necessity, which is regarded as Khayyam’s most important philosophical treatise, he tells us that the subject of Being and necessity are among the questions of an ultimate nature. What lies at the heart of such philosophical inquiries, and what needs to be first and foremost understood before any other philosophical issue is treated, Khayyam tells us, is the question of Being and its modalities. He tells us that our first encounter with Being is to ask, “Is it?” (hal huwa) a question that pertains to the Beingness of Being. The second encounter is to question the reality of being and ask, “What is it?” (ma huwa) and the third question is to ask, “Why is it?” (lam)

Being as such, Khayyam argues, resists disclosure and does not lend itself to these questions. We cannot ask, “Is it?” because in doing so we use the notion of Being to inquire about Being which is tautologous. The second and third questions, “What is it?” and “Why is it?” equally evade definition for the same reason as the former. Khayyam, therefore, concludes that the possibility of understanding Being through discursive means does not exist. As he explains, “If you look at all the existent beings and reflect upon their “whatness,” your thought will lead you to form a firm opinion that the “whatness” of all things leads to a whatness and cause for which there is no whatness or cause.”

Khayyam’s discursive approach in treating the question of Being which continues throughout his philosophical writings is primarily designed to answer what he