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Thinkable and Unthinkable

Abstract

The subject of this paper is the question whether beyond the boundary of the thinkable there is something that is not only non-sensible, but un-thinkable as well. The paper argues that, as there is a khōrismos that divides the sensible dimension of the Being from the thinkable dimension of it, it could be presupposed that there is a khōrismos which divides the thinkable dimension from the un-thinkable. The argumentation that follows the mentioned presupposition is taken from Al-Ġazālī who is among those thinkers who believe this is true. Al-Ġazālī's arguments are then supported by arguments from Plato's famous Seventh letter.

Keywords

man's powers of cognizance, thinkable, un-thinkable, *theōria* (intellectual insight), *thea* (vision), Al-Ġazālī, Plato

Most people (including most philosophers) divide the Being into *perceptible* and *thinkable*, i.e. they consider that it has only these two dimensions, one of which is the domain of *aisthēsis* and the other the domain of *noēsis*. But why should this be understandable by itself, that is, that this is so that the 'thinkable' is the only boundary within the Being, that 'above', 'beyond', 'beside' the thinkable there is nothing else?

Philosophers recognize the boundary (border, partition, gap) that divides these two dimensions of the Being; Plato stresses that there is a split (*khōrismos*) between the phenomenon and the idea. But this split is seen only in beings that have the power of thinking; those beings that have only the faculty of sensible perception are not aware of this split and are not aware of this division, i.e. are not aware of the existence of the *thinkable dimension of the Being*. Man is a specific living being because thanks to reason (*logos*) – besides *aisthēsis* – he has *noēsis* as well; he has the power of thinking. And thinking is but distinguishing between the perceptible and the thinkable in the Being, between the phenomenon and its abstract essence. In another words, man is man by aspiring – thanks to his nature, as Aristotle says – to rising (by thinking) over the sensible border of the whole of Being. If this rising over is, in a way, that which is given to man as man "by his nature", why would it not be legitimate to at least only pre-suppose that a *khōrismos* might divide the dimension of the thinkable from that of the *unthinkable*? It might be said: it is not legitimate just because it is *unthinkable*. But in the same way, theoretically speaking, from the point of view of those living beings (animals) who do not possess the power of *noēsis* – and because of this do not perceive the division of the Being into sensibly perceivable and thinkable – it could be said that for those living beings the thinkable dimension of the Being does not exist, because it is not accessible to *aisthēsis*! So, it is not surprising that there are

those who are convinced that there *is* a dimension of unthinkable; those who are, most commonly, called ‘mystics’. In this essay possible arguments which could confirm their conviction will be considered.

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It seems that the unidimensionality and pluridimensionality of the Being is essentially linked to the powers of living beings, or, to be more precise, it could be said that they have, according to their powers, the awareness of the unidimensionality or of the pluridimensionality of the Being. In all living beings (including both animals and men) that which makes them living beings is the power which is called *aisthēsis*. It is the power by which these beings experience the world, i.e. the Being. This power unveils the world as a *sensible* Being, and if the being does not have another power aside from this, for him the Being will have only this – sensible – dimension, the dimension that is perceived by the senses. But man is distinguished by the power which other living beings do not possess – *noēsis*, which is the power of man’s soul. It is thanks to this power that man rises beyond *perception* (which is the fruit of sensibility) by *speculative cognizance* (which is the fruit of thinking). Thanks to sensibility man (as other living beings) perceives individual beings/things, and thanks to thinking he cognizes that which is ‘invisible’ for sensibility; invisible because it is not grasped by the senses, because it is ‘separated’ from concrete beings/things, because it is *abstract*. Sensitive perception grasps the individual, speculative cognizance grasps the universal (in individuals).

When man rises to the universal, he rises to that which philosophy calls *eidōs* – the image, the idea of a being. (Incidentally, it would be useful to remind oneself that there are several levels of the universal, several levels of *eidōs*: the lower which is represented, for example, by the notion of a ‘living being’, the higher – Aristotle would say: the highest – is that level which is represented by the notion of ‘being as being’. The first is attained by science – *epistēmē*; the other is attained by wisdom – *sophia*.) But with *eidōs* we have already left the domain of *aisthēsis* rising to the domain of *noēsis*. Let’s consider, then, what thinking is; what is that by which thinking is thinking?

All thinking has to distinguish two dimensions in beings/things that are separated from each other, distinguished as that which is ‘thinkable’ and that which is ‘sensible’, i.e. that which in a being/thing is essential (and pertains to thought) and that which is not so (and pertains to sensible perception). Namely, the purpose of thinking is to attain that which is essential in a being/thing. In other words, thinking – in order to attain the essential – has to make abstraction from that which is not abstract; has to divide the noetic from (just) sensible, has to “reveal” *khōrismos* that divides them. Thinking has to “reveal” the essential by defining it, i.e. by restricting it, and, in doing so, separate it from the un-essential. The basic in thinking, then, is to establish that which is called *eidōs*, and which by the dividing line of *khōrismos* is separated from the sensible in a being/thing. While to the sensible perception only the sensible, only the ‘outward’, only the un-essential dimension of a being/thing is attainable, its essential aspect (*eidōs*) is attainable only to thinking. By revealing the *eidōs* of a being/thing, thinking reveals that the Being, besides sensible, has another dimension.

A gap, a border, *khōrismos*, therefore, divides that which is attainable by sensible perception from that which is attainable (only) by thinking, or in other (Plato’s) words, it divides (in a being) the *phenomenon* from the *idea*. But one might ask: Is there a *khōrismos* that divides the idea (that which is the essence of a being) from something higher? Namely, idea (which is a word that

is derived from the same verb, *eidenai*, from which the word *eidos* is derived, and which means ‘that which is seen’, which ‘manifests itself’, which ‘shows itself’) is, in a way, only the ‘image’, the ‘form’; and the image *is not* that of which it is the image! So one can think that the *idea* is not that of which it is the idea, i.e. of which it is the manifestation. In other words, just as there is the non-sensible aspect as its higher aspect behind the sensible aspect of a being, thus it can be legitimate to imagine that behind the idea there is something which is higher than it, and which is higher than it just like *idea* is higher than thing. If a being – Plato says – *is* by partaking in the idea, could it not be that the idea also partakes in something that makes it an idea? In other words, is there – besides the thinkable, which is the idea – something ‘higher’? And is this ‘higher’ thinkable or un-thinkable? How does thinking cope with this ‘higher’?

Plato stated that *there is* something that makes an idea an idea – in other words: a supreme idea, thanks to which *noūs* can ‘see’ the idea of a being – and that is the *Idea of Good* (‘good’ in the ontological sense). For him the *Idea of Good* is that which throws light upon the idea of a being the way the Sun throws light upon beings and makes them visible. And, as without the Sun the beings would not be visible, thus without the Idea of Good the ideas would not be ‘visible’. From the point of view of man, if there were no Sun, the beings would not exist for man, because he knows about their existence thanks to their sensible visibility; if there were no Idea of Good, for man, ideas would not exist, because he knows about their existence thanks to their ‘visibility’ (which is not sensible but thinkable), thanks to their partaking in their *eidos*. Contemplation of the Idea of Good for Plato is *thea* (vision) – vision, direct observation, direct contemplation – because as the eye can turn from looking at visible things directly to the Sun itself, so the intellect can turn from contemplating ideas in beings directly to the Supreme Idea, to the Idea of Good. (If thinking is nothing but – a particular – way of ‘seeing’, it would be useful to remind ourselves of something which is often stressed, i.e. that the Sun itself cannot be seen, that one *cannot* look directly at it; so – according to this – that which is the ‘highest’ would be *un-thinkable* (as the Sun is not directly visible). That’s why ‘to turn directly’ to the Supreme Idea cannot mean to ‘think’! *Thea* cannot be *theōria*!

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In considering the question whether there is any similarity between Platonic *thea* and *theōria*, we will look for help from the testimony of a great Arab thinker from the 11th century, Al-Ġazālī, one of those philosophers and theologians and mystics, who had ‘complete insight’ into man’s cognitive powers. His insatiable craving for what he himself called *certain knowledge* defined the broadness of his insights. He was well acquainted with Hellenic thought, he mastered theology and philosophy, thoroughly learned *ṣūfī* (Islamic) mysticism and Christian doctrine. After having seen for himself the insufficiency of both the theological and philosophic path to ‘certain knowledge’, he – finally – turned to what is called ‘mystic cognizance’.

Al-Ġazālī – in his autobiography¹ – speaks of “clear knowledge”, which, according to him, are “sensible data and necessities of intellect”.² It is obvious

¹ Al-Ġazālī, *Munqid min ad-ḍalāl*; see Bosnian translation by Hilmo Neimarlija: Ebu Hamid El-Gazali, *Izbavljenje od zablude*, El-Kalem, Sarajevo 1989.

² Ibid., p. 17.

that here he speaks about that which is given by *aisthēsis* and that which stems from *noēsis*, i.e. it is obvious that he implies the division of the Being into a sensible dimension and a thinkable dimension. But this “clear knowledge” did not satisfy his craving for *certain knowledge*. After having considered “with uttermost seriousness” “sensible data and necessities of intellect” – as he himself says – “by lasting doubt”,³ he concluded that he could not believe in certainty of sensible data, because “along comes judge Reason and drives us into a lie” (i.e. drives the sensible data into a lie)! Then he thought:

“And maybe behind judge Reason there is another judge, who – appearing – would belie Reason. [...] The fact that such perception does not manifest itself, does not mean that it is impossible.”⁴

The doubt that the necessity of reason could give certain knowledge rose from his studying of rational theology (*kalām*), which “did not reach the ultimate goal, nor did it dissipate the obscurities of bewilderment of people’s discord”, as well as from his study of philosophy (*falsafa*) that reveals *different* doctrines, causing difficulties in discriminating what in them is true and what is not true.⁵

Next Al-Ġazālī’s step in his examining the ways of cognizance was the study of Sufism, part of Islamic mysticism. In the *ṣūfī* method, which consists of “knowledge and acting”, the acting itself is of decisive importance. The purpose of acting is obliterating obstacles that (corporeal and spiritual) inclinations put on the path of reaching the goal, i.e. the purpose is – says Al-Ġazālī in short – to achieve the “heart’s renunciation from everything that is not God, may He be exalted”.⁶ Al-Ġazālī possessed this knowledge by acquiring it thanks to the perfection in his rational way of cognizance, the one given by theology and philosophy. But, as he himself says, it was much easier to comprehend (in the theological and philosophical sense), than to act (in the Sufi sense), and he corroborates it with an exemplificative explanation:

“What great difference is between man *knowing* the definition of health or satiety, their causes and preconditions, on the one hand, and *being* healthy or satiated, on the other.”⁷

He himself – thanks to the sciences and disciplines which he studied and mastered – established *cognizance* which is the matter of *faith*, because it was the *thinking* that led to that cognizance. But he also understood the essential difference between intellectual disciplines and *ṣūfī* mystic discipline: Sufis are not people of intellectual cognizance, but people of *experience*. He acquired this knowledge by learning and by mastering the laws of thinking, i.e. the ‘necessities of reason’, but that which is experienced and lived was not in his power. And the complete happiness of man is in that knowledge which is *certain knowledge*, the knowledge which – we should say – is *more* than knowledge; after he became familiar with Sufism, he understood that it can be reached only by ‘acting’, which is the prerequisite for turning that which is only ‘knowledge’ into full *experience*. He understood that science (as well as theology and philosophy) is the establishment of the truth by proof and demonstration, while Sufism is *union* with the Truth, contemplation of the Truth (which is not only demonstrated but experienced truth).

After having decided to take this path, the path of mysticism, Al-Ġazālī speaks of the “fight between mundane passions and the call of eternity”, and of his final decision to distribute all his possessions, to leave Baghdad, and retire into utter isolation.⁸ He lived this way for ten years, and while living this way “things that cannot be numbered or related in a full way” were revealed to him.⁹ Essential – from the aspect that is the subject of this essay – is this

acknowledgment that not much can be said about mystic revelations, which is directly linked to Al-Ġazālī's understanding of intellectual cognition: the benefit of reason is in that it directs man – thanks to its 'necessities', i.e. thanks to demonstration – to that which, according to Al-Ġazālī, in the full sense, is only in the power of the prophet's 'eye'; and this is, at the same time, the limitation of reason itself. "From that which is beyond, reason is cut off, and to it remains only to make understandable that which the physicist prescribes to the sick person",¹⁰ meaning that here the 'physicist' is a likening image for the prophet. In other words, Revelation gives 'the medicine' to man, which theology and philosophy explain and make understandable, which is both the benefit and, at the same time, the limit of reason, and the *reality* of this 'medicine' can be directly experienced only in mystic contemplation of the Truth (which for Al-Ġazālī is the Truth of the Revelation). It is because it makes possible this direct 'tasting', direct experience, that mystic contemplation is higher than intellectual cognizance.

The doctrine of *taṣawwuf* (Islamic mysticism) and *ṣūfī* practice showed Al-Ġazālī that, what remains hidden and out of reach for the theologians and philosophers, the devout mystic reaches by intuition. For him it will mean that God is not only a mere Absolute, as philosophers see Him, but a living God who continues to have a relation with His creatures, and that this communication with God can have different aspects – it may have the form of prayer, it may be the act of contemplation, and it may be result of mystic union with Him. Al-Ġazālī learned that true illumination is not the effect achieved by man's intellectual faculties that leads to knowledge, but the result of the effort of man's whole being in approaching the Truth, i.e. God.

This fundamental understanding that Al-Ġazālī reached on his mystic path became the basis of his great opus *Iḥyā' ulūm ad-dīn* (*The Revival of Religious Sciences*), also testified to by one of the books that make up this opus – *The Book of Love*.¹¹ In this book he speaks of the main medium of communication with God as Truth – of love, which on the path towards unquestionable cognizance complements (and even replaces) intellectual insight. Demonstrating that all aspects of love are always linked to God, he sees love as the 'royal path' that leads to the highest form of cognizance – to direct contemplation of the Truth. (It is not superfluous to mention here that one of the names of God in Islam is *The Truth or The Truthful* [*Al-Ḥaqq*], where this 'Truth' needs to be understood as *ontological* truth, i.e. 'The Truthful' needs to be understood as 'One that really is'. God is 'One that truly is', and being 'The One that truly is', He is everything that is, He is 'The One that is'.)

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Ibid.

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Ibid., p. 18.

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See *ibid.*, p. 24, 27.

6

Ibid., p. 52.

7

Ibid., p. 53 (italic by D. B.).

8

See *ibid.*, pp. 55–56.

9

Ibid.

10

Ibid., p. 67.

11

See the Croatian translation by Daniel Bučan: Al-Ġazālī, *Knjiga o ljubavi, čežnji, prisnosti i zadovoljstvu*, Demetra, Zagreb 2015.

It is quite normal for a thinker of the 11th century that the Highest, that what is behind and above all sensible and all thinkable is God. His entire (both speculative and mystic) experience disclosed this *ultimate* cognizance to Al-Ġazālī; the ‘certain knowledge’ he craved all his life, can only be experience of that which is the Highest, the Highest of which it is not enough that it be *thought*, but it should be craved for as a living *experience*.

Al-Ġazālī’s mysticism was based on orthodox Islamic doctrine, but – as Margaret Smith says¹² – it surpasses its boundaries and in some of its essential characteristics it is akin to the theosophical aspect of mysticism. His later works,¹³ devoted primarily to mysticism, based on personal spiritual experience, reveal a more ‘elaborated’ mysticism of theosophical type. For him the world is a manifestation of God, and he sees man as a microcosm, which is also God’s manifestation; that is why man, endowed with intellect and with the faculty of thinking (which makes it possible for him to ‘produce’ notions and to reach rational cognizance), can potentially go beyond the boundaries that necessarily limit the intellect, and ‘step’ into the sphere of divine spirit, the sphere of ‘inner light’ that proceeds from the Light of Lights. Then in man’s purified heart – purified by prayer, by meditation on God, by maintaining the love for Him – the Light will burn with its untroubled brilliance, the way the flame is reflected untroubled only in a clean mirror; to dwell in the light of the Light means to be with God.

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Speaking of division of the Being into the sensible dimension and the thinkable dimension, we mentioned that Plato spoke of *khōrismos* that separates the phenomenon from the idea. Plato could be taken as the paradigm of a philosopher (some would even say: as the paradigm of philosophy itself¹⁴), not as a mystic. But it is significant that even this *philosopher par excellence* speaks – truth to say, only in a very restraining way – about what in this essay is called the un-thinkable dimension of the Being. It is worth citing something from his *Seventh Letter*.

Saying that nobody has real acquaintance with the most important part of his philosophy, because he has “composed no work in regard to it”, nor shall he “ever do so in future”, Plato explains why he wrote nothing about “the most important part of his philosophy”, saying that “there is no way of putting it into words like other studies”. He says that “acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining”.¹⁵ Further, he reminds us that there are three things by which something is cognized (first a *name*, second a *definition*, third an *image*, i.e. reflection), and there is the fourth, i.e. the knowledge of the object, and – finally – the fifth: *the object of knowledge itself*. What is meant by this is that, although each of the four (i.e. name, definition, image, and knowledge) is necessary for cognizance, none of them is not the fifth, i.e. is not the *object of knowledge itself*. And although he says that intellectual contemplation is nearest to the object of cognizance, Plato stresses that “those first four degrees try to show for each thing its quality, as well as its real essence by words which are *feeble means*”.¹⁶ Because of this feebleness of rational discourse, because the words are ‘feeble means’, nobody who is intelligent will dare “to put into language the things which his reason contemplated”.¹⁷ Hence Plato concludes:

“When anyone sees anywhere the written work of anyone, whether that of a lawgiver in his laws or whatever it may be in some other subject, the subject treated cannot have been his most serious concern [...] His most serious interests have their abode somewhere in the noblest region of his being (i.e. in the soul).”¹⁸

In the opinion of the author of this essay, it seems that between what Al-Ġazālī says and what Plato says there are some essential similarities. Let us start with the last of Plato’s citations. Plato says that in the case of a serious author that which is the *most serious* cannot be found in his written works, but in the “noblest region” of his being – *in the soul*. For Al-Ġazālī the soul is also ‘the region’ in which the light of the Light will shine. Plato says that the acquaintance with the object of cognizance comes by ‘attendance’ and by ‘close companionship’ with it, when “suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul”, and this blaze further on “becomes self-sustaining”, and this is comparable to Al-Ġazālī’s mystic experience which pertains to the illuminated soul. And, finally, both Plato and Al-Ġazālī say that “there is no way of putting it into words”, or that mystic experience reveals things that cannot be “related in a full way”.

So we see that both of them say the same: that which is the most important – which cannot be ‘known’ but experienced – is impossible to express by discursive means: the most important is the *un-thinkable*. Both of them testify to the un-thinkable dimension of the Being, testify that besides *khōrismos*, which separates the sensible from the thinkable, there is a *khōrismos* that separates the thinkable from that which can only be experienced spiritually. And that this which can be only experienced spiritually is that which is the most important, the *highest*.

Therefore, it can be concluded: philosophizing, although being the noblest effort of man’s being, although it represents the daimonic, half-human half-divine desire (*erōs*), is not by itself the guarantor for achieving the highest possible object of man’s aspiration. Philosophy is not “sufficient” because it does not guarantee the highest achievement; it does not guarantee the highest achievement because it is – in the end – limited by its *discursive being*. To a philosopher, then, remains only the hope that – maybe one day – he will rise beyond these discursive boundaries and find his “peace” by reaching the sphere of the un-thinkable.

12 Margaret Smith, *Al-Ghazali the Mystic*, Hijra International Publishers, Lahore 1983.

13 For example, *Rawḍa aṭ-ṭālibīn* [*The Satisfaction of the Seekers*], *Miškāt al-anwār* [*The Niche of Light*], and *Mukāšafa al-qulūb* [*Illumination of the Hearts*], etc.

14 See, for example, *Despotova predavanja (1969–1971)* [*The Lectures of Branko Despot (1969–1971)*], Demetra, Zagreb 2014, p. 103, the chapter entitled “Filozofija sâma: Platon” [“Philosophy Itself: Plato”].

15 Plato, *The Seventh Letter*, 341d.

16 Ibid., 342e.

17 Ibid., 343a.

18 Ibid., 344c.

Daniel Bučan

Mislivo i nemislivo

Sažetak

Tema ovog ogleđa jest pitanje ima li onkraj međa mislivoga nečega što je ne samo neosjetno nego i nemislivo. U ogleđu se kaže da se može pretpostaviti da, kao što postoji khōrismos koji razdvaja osjetilnu dimenziju bitka od njegove mislive dimenzije, postoji khōrismos koji razdvaja mislivu dimenziju od nemislive. Argumentacija kojom se potkrepljuje tu pretpostavku preuzima se od Al-Gazālīja kao jednog od mislilaca koji u to vjeruju. Al-Gazālījevi se argumenti potom osnažuju argumentima iz Platonova glasovitog Sedmog pisma.

Ključne riječi

čovjekove moći spoznavanja, mislivo, nemislivo, *theōria* (umski uvid), *thea* (vizija), Al-Gazālī, Platon

Daniel Bučan

Denkbares und Undenkbares

Zusammenfassung

Der Gegenstand dieser Arbeit ist die Frage, ob jenseits der Grenzen des Denkbaren etwas existiert, was nicht nur nichtsinnlich ist, sondern auch ebenso undenkbar. Die Abhandlung legt Folgendes dar: Wie es den Chorismos gibt, der die sinnliche Dimension des Seins von seiner denkbaren Dimension trennt, so lässt sich annehmen, dass geradeso der Chorismos besteht, welcher die denkbare Dimension von der undenkbaren separiert. Die Argumentation, die der erwähnten Annahme folgt, wird von Al-Ghazālī übernommen, der einer der Denker ist, die das glauben. Al-Ghazālīs Argumente werden dann durch Argumente von Platons berühmtem Siebtem Brief unterstützt.

Schlüsselwörter

menschliche Erkenntniskräfte, Denkbares, Undenkbares, *theōria* (geistige Einsicht), *thea* (Vision), Al-Ghazālī, Platon

Daniel Bučan

Le pensable et le non-pensable

Résumé

L'objet de ce travail s'attache à la question de savoir s'il existe, en-deçà des limites du pensable, quelque chose qui ne soit pas seulement non-sensible, mais également non-pensable. Cet article affirme qu'il est possible de supposer, à l'instar du chorismos qui sépare la dimension sensible de celle du pensable, un chorismos qui sépare la dimension du pensable de celle du non-pensable. L'argumentation qui soutient cette supposition découle d'Al-Ghazālī, considéré comme l'un des penseurs qui appuie cette séparation. Les arguments d'Al-Ghazālī sont étayés par des arguments contenus dans la célèbre VIIe Lettre de Platon.

Mots-clés

pouvoirs de la connaissance de l'Homme, pensable, non-pensable, *theōria* (connaissance intellectuelle), *thea* (vision), Al-Ghazālī, Platon