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The Veridicality of Perceptual Prophetic Experiences: A New Proposal

One of the key features of prophecy, according to Islamic sources, is the perceptual experiences prophets undergo—such as ‘seeing’ fire in a tree or the angel Gabriel, or ‘hearing’ voices reciting revealed verses. These experiences exhibit perceptual phenomenology; for instance, it appears to the prophet that he has encountered a ‘person’ or ‘fire’ with specific visual properties. This raises a question regarding their veridicality. Typically, a visual experience is considered veridical only if the subject actually encounters an object with the properties represented in the experience, such as a specific shape, size, or lighting. However, presumably no such physical object was present in the prophet’s surroundings during these experiences.

To address this challenge, two main theories have been proposed in the Islamic philosophical tradition. The first, articulated by Al-Farabi and later endorsed by Ibn Sina and others, holds that during revelation, the prophet’s soul acquires intelligible forms from the active intellect (*al-‘aql al-fa‘āl*) sometimes identified with the angel Gabriel. Since the prophet’s imaginative faculty (*al-quwwah al-mutakhayyilah*) is highly perfected, it receives these intelligible forms as well, and then symbolize (*muḥākāt*) them as perceptual experiences. While the prophet does not actually encounter an external object with the perceived properties, the experience is not entirely illusory, as it symbolically represents intelligible truths through perceptual and imaginative forms.

The second theory, championed by Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra, seeks to assign a stronger notion of veridicality to prophetic experiences. According to this view, the objects of these experiences belong to the world of images (*‘ālam al-mithāl*). Though not material, these entities possess certain physical properties such as shape and size. Thus, when it appears to the prophet that he perceives an entity with specific shape and size, he is indeed encountering an external, mind-independent entity with those properties—albeit one that exists in the world of images rather than the material world.

After briefly examining these two theories, I propose an alternative approach to encounter the veridicality challenge, which is much less ontologically demanding. Drawing on David Chalmers’ work (2010), I suggest that prophetic experiences, like ordinary perceptual experiences, contain two types of content: perfect content and imperfect content. While the perfect content of prophetic experiences is not veridical, this does not pose a unique veridicality problem, as even ordinary experiences often (or perhaps, always) have falsidical perfect content. However, the imperfect content of prophetic experiences can still be veridical due to its disjunctive nature. I will then explore some implications of this framework for interpreting revelation.



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Mahmoud Morvarid pursued Islamic studies at the Seminaries of Mashhad and Qom in Iran before earning a PhD in analytic philosophy from the School of Philosophy at the Institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences (IPM) in Tehran, where he currently serves as a faculty member. His research interests include metaphysics, philosophy of religion, philosophy of mind, Islamic philosophy, and Shiite Principles of Jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*). Additionally, he is interested in exploring connections between various branches of analytic philosophy and the intellectual heritage of the Islamic tradition, including philosophy, *kalām*, and *uṣūl al-fiqh*. He has published works in both English and Persian.