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The `Aql in the Qur'an and Islamic Civilization

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Introduction

The second short-term course on “Islam and Contemporary Issues”, with a focus on “Intellect in the Qur’an and Islamic Civilization” aimed to assess the relation between Qur’anic notion of *`aql* and its pertinence to the concept of “*Intellect/Reason*” that appeared in the Islamic traditional knowledge both in transmitted and intellectual forms.

In this Short-term course Islam’s approach towards rationality, its principles, features, and outcomes has been tackled at the analytical section of the course through a comparative study between the Qur’anic notion of *`aql* with a focus on Islamic sciences, and modern rationalism.

On a deeper level, the course has addressed the following questions:

Could Islamic *`aql* answer the questions and challenges of the contemporary world and the contemporary man? If the answer is yes, how can this take place?

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The course has also tackled fundamental issues such as challenges and predicaments ahead of the contemporary man.

Thus this book deals with different dimensions of *`aql* as it is described in the Islamic sources with analyzing how it pertains to the contemporary world.

Tehran branch of MIU hopes for future development of this kind of discussions to evaluate the functionality and responses of the Islamic *`aql* in the modern era.

Intellectuality and knowledge in Islam

Ayatollah Alireza Aarafi¹

- Translated and Edited By Amir Abbas Salehi

Knowledge is the nature of mankind. If it accompanies with some features and conceptions, in Islamic worldview, we can name it wisdom and Intellect. The wisdom and

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Intellect which Quran and religious sources talk about are more particular than what is generally meant by them. There are features which if they accompany knowledge then we call it wisdom and Intellect. These characteristics & features are categorized as these (i.e. those features which turn instrumental intellect into divine intellect and wisdom): First, Islam and religious sources, with regard to human intellect, put their emphasis on the realism.

Although there are some reliable and true facts in other theories of truth but, with regard to understanding knowledge, the central point in Islamic thought is that knowledge bridges the internal world with the external world and in principle can show the reality to human. This characteristic, as you know, is very controversial. Knowledge in Quranic point of view has a lot of instrumentality and contributions but the central point in all of them is that it rejoins us to the external world. Knowledge is essentially so. The second characteristic which is emphasized and can turn knowledge into spiritual intellect and wisdom is the fact that knowledge is the divine blessing and is so precious. Knowledge originates from divinity and is emanated from God to human. The same can be said about all the universe but knowledge is a supra-material event which comes from The Lord and divinity.through Considering this, the knowledge is changed into wisdom and spiritual intellect. The Quranic expression about knowledge is “and you are not given aught of knowledge but a little”. Knowledge is bestowed by God. Knowledge is something which emanates from the other world to human soul. The moment that we connect to the supra-material world, the knowledge will appear. This is the second element and characteristic which get the knowledge come nearer to the divine and spiritual intellect. Third, knowledge has different layers, stages

dimensions. It starts from empirical stage and goes through deep and supra-natural layers (which are at their peak intuitive and can be grasped by everyone) and ends in them. Knowledge reaches to that level expressed in the context of revelation. Therefore knowledge, in the teachings of Islam, is not limited to one level or stage. Rather it has many different levels. We must both clarify these stages and levels for normal people and know that intuitive knowledge can reach to the point that is known as revelation. Thus the third characteristic is that the knowledge has levels and stages and can end in intuition and the ultimate level of that is the reunion of Perfect Man to the absent world. This characteristic also shows that even our sensory knowledge is based on speculative knowledge and there is a connection between these layers.

Sixth, there is a connection between our knowledge and our environment (i.e. both family and society). There are many verses that support this connection thoroughly. Our knowledge not only represents the world to us but also is in a strong interaction with it. Our understanding faculty is in a connection with the family members from the time we are born and extends to other spheres and situations. These environments which have layers are affected by our knowledge and at the same time have effects on it.

The last three points that are mentioned above show the connections between human cognitive faculty and his attributes, actions and external environment. These are facts that we must consider carefully. It must be mentioned that these facts do not reject the realism of knowledge.

The seventh point regards the inherent limitations of knowledge and its domain in exploring and discovering the world. Neither sensory knowledge nor speculative and philosophical knowledge can figure out all the secrets of the

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world. The same can be said about the intuitional knowledge. This is an intrinsic limitation. Quran says “and you are not given aught of knowledge but a little” and this saying is true in any time. No matter how far human knowledge can reach in the domain of natural sciences and philosophical and mystical knowledge, these are all incomplete due to inherent limitation of human knowledge. These points differentiate intellect and wisdom from science. In other words, with regard to these limitations we can confine science boundaries. Quran considers and confirms Science inherent limitations.

The eighth point is related to the previous points but it is worth to be considered separately. The point is that science alongside with its inherent and intrinsic limitations has some accidental internal and external limitations. There are many verses and traditions speaking about this.

Some of these accidental internal limitations include are friendship and animosity, love and hatred, lust and anger. These bind our intellect. Sins and wrongdoings, as well, are other limitations which prevent us accessing pure knowledge. But these limitations can be handled and managed. Accidental external limitations are like obeying the established tradition of the society, which Quran explicitly speaks about.

Although, in the teachings of Quran, these internal and external limitations cast shadow on our knowledge and inquiry but human being has the ability to overcome these limitations which consist of internal desires and external motives. Man can free himself from these internal and external motives and religions do invite him to grasp wisdom and reach the religious meaning of intellect.

Another point, with regard to knowledge in the context of Quran, is that knowledge and inquiry, essentially, bring

responsibility. Knowledge makes the knower responsible. Knowledge is something that brings more responsibility.

Each man is responsible for his society and God for every single blessing that god has gifted him. This responsibility is twice more for one who possesses some knowledge. "then you will surely be asked that Day about pleasure". The very nature of knowledge requires this commitment. Knowledge, by its nature, must take away individualism and set out solidarity and social commitment.

Tenth, knowledge has priority and levels according to its subjects. There are levels of knowledge according to its subjects. Those subjects which are more influential with regard to our prosperity and perfection have priority. For instance, knowledge of God, in the Islamic thought, stands in the first place, for its importance. This shows that there is an order based on priority upon our system of knowledge.

The eleventh is the point that knowledge is manageable and must be engineered. Knowledge is an event which is in control of mankind. There are two views regarding this issue. In one hand, knowledge is out of our control and so cannot be tamed, and in another hand knowledge is manageable. According to the Quran, knowledge has a general attitude which affect human and involuntarily comes to existence. We can, however, manage about its principle and decide about it. We can, by doing this, control its harms and its limitations.

Another point that is worth to be mentioned is that alongside with those internal and external limitations which bind knowledge from representing reality, there are some accordant grounds inside and outside which can broaden the domain of knowledge and make it more worthy. There are some elements in Islamic Mysticism which emphasize on soul edification and inner purity, by which, new ways will be

revealed for man. In other words, the coordination between inner and outer forces will open new ways vis a vis human intellectuality and understanding. “ He will give you a light so you can walk by that”.

We must mention that Islam does believe in revelation alongside human knowledge. This revelation, however, is based on contemplation and knowledge. When we establish the basis upon a realistic cognition, then, we will trust on another source without which we cannot access many other spheres. Intellect, thus, is compatible with religion and jurisprudence, in Islamic world view. This doesn't implicitly result in total correspondence of intellect and religion, as some intellectuals think, but rather Islam sees a harmony between intellect and religion generally.

Another important issue in this context is that knowledge goes with morality and decency. Gaining knowledge, studentship and learning are accompanied with some rituals and manners. One of the important issues of Islamic training is teaching and nurturing morals about which hundreds books have been written and compiled and must be considered profoundly. Quranic wisdom and intellect is more particular than the instrumental intellect and general knowledge. This particularity was mentioned within the points. What is represented and outlined here was a preparation for the discussion about the place of knowledge in Quran and Islam. This discussion will be continued during this short term course with the professors.