

Qur'ānic Emphasis on Reason and Philosophy: A Study of Relevant Qur'ānic Verses

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ABSTRACT

Intellect is one of the greatest gifts of God to humanity and it's a major source of knowledge. Animals mostly act and behave through their instincts and they are devoid of higher abstract thinking. Scientifically speaking, humans possess a sophisticated brain which becomes the store house of superior and stupendous conscious thought. Human consciousness is considered by many scientists and intellectuals as the most complex phenomenon in the entire universe. It is evident by these facts that the infallible Word of God must give importance and value to the human intellect and prompt us to use reason in a sound and unbiased manner to reach factual conclusions. In this paper we intend to study various Qur'anic verses which started the intellectual discussions among the Arabs who were devoid of any philosophical and metaphysical worldview and blindly imitated their forefathers engaging in superstitious idolatry.

Key Words: Quran, Intellect, Epistemology, Reason, Evidence

Introduction

When we study the basics of philosophy, we come to know that it is a peculiar human endeavor. Philosophical thought and contemplation leads men to conceptualize the percepts and think in an abstract manner. Many civilizations developed various philosophical thoughts and contributed in the development of Metaphysics, Ontology, Epistemology, Ethics, Aesthetics and Logic. Chinese, Indian, Greek and Persian cultures developed many philosophical ideas. Jewish people also had their religious philosophy based on the revelations and teachings of various prophets and scholars. But Arabs lacked any complex philosophical thought and most of the people could not read and write. Indeed, they were masters of language and poetry but their poetry was recorded/memorized orally and passed

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on to the next generations orally. Moreover there were no religious scriptures or revealed knowledge among the Arabs before the advent of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Arabs were blindly emulating their superstitious ancestors and they had forgotten Abrahamic Monotheism taught by Hazrat Ibrahim (AS) and Hazrat Ismail (AS). The time was ripe for divine guidance and teaching so as to develop them mentally and spiritually. It was the Infallible Revelation of Allah which they received through Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW) which instigated them to rethink their beliefs, practices and values. Qur'an rebuked the idolaters for blindly following the previous generations and inspired them to think for themselves. Throughout Qur'an we find many verses which give high importance to higher abstract thinking, reasoning, contemplation, reflection and meditation. Time and again Holy Qur'an provided evidences for the Truth of Revelation and the Oneness of God Almighty. It also challenged the people to bring forth any evidence in support of their pagan practices which obviously they failed to provide. Qur'an also commanded people to ponder over the verses of this sublime revelation to grasp its true meaning and purpose. This proves that Qur'an engaged with the reasoning faculty of the people and did not support the blind imitation of ideas. We will assess the Qur'anic verses where importance of intellect is highlighted and evidences are provided in favour of the Absolute, Supreme and Ultimate Reality, Allah.

An Introduction to Philosophy

As already stated, Arabs lacked both, the Divine Revelation and philosophical thought. They were following their cultural superstitions without thinking over the truth or falsehood of their pagan creeds. To understand the development philosophical thinking in Arabs first we have to clarify the general meaning of philosophy and its contents. Philosophy is peculiar to humans because of our complex and sophisticated consciousness and conceptual thinking. We not only perceive things through our senses, we conceptualize the perceptions in a logical and meaningful pattern. Religiously speaking this is because we possess a higher form of soul or spirit which is absent in animals.

Philosophy is derived from two Greek words, 'philo' meaning 'love of' and 'sophia' meaning 'wisdom'. Etymologically it means 'love of wisdom'. Terminologically philosophy is the study of the fundamental nature of Existence.

It studies the concept of knowledge. It is a method of sound reasoning and logical thinking. There are various branches of Philosophy. Metaphysics studies the characteristics of Reality. It asks fundamental questions like; what is the purpose of the Universe? What is the meaning of life? What is the Ultimate Cause of the Physical Reality? Next important branch of Philosophy is Epistemology. Epistemology is the theory of Knowledge. It studies the nature and method of acquiring knowledge. It also raises these important questions; what is Knowledge? Is knowledge possible? What are the various means and methods by which we can acquire knowledge? Another important branch of Philosophy is 'Ethics'. It studies the moral principles which humans should abide by individually and collectively. The subject matter of Ethics is; is morality absolute and objective or relative and subjective? What is the best source of morality? How should we conduct ourselves in the society? What is the appropriate behaviour in a given situation?

Another prominent branch of Philosophy is logic. It is a systematic way of reasoning which helps us to reach sound and factual conclusions. It's the basis of Rational Thinking. Whenever we engage in meaningful discussions and debates, logic is knowingly or unknowingly used as a tool to substantiate our claims. A common form of logic mostly used is deductive method. The argument is started by the premises known by every human being. And finally a conclusion is derived from the known premises. An example will be appropriate to illustrate the method using in logical thinking. This is a famous syllogism used by the father of Western Logic, Aristotle and is as follows:

Premise 1: All humans are mortal

Premise 2: Socrates is human

Conclusion: Socrates is mortal

When the premises are axiomatic and known to all, the conclusion will be considered logically correct. The word logic is derived from the Greek word 'Logos' which literally means 'Word'. Hence when humans engage in meaningful speech they are using logic formally or informally. The haphazard speech of an insane person lacks logical pattern. In Indian Philosophy or 'Darshan' logic is

known as ‘Tark’. Arabs called it ‘Mantiq’ which is derived from the Arabic word ‘Nutq’ meaning ‘Speech’.

Western Philosophy has its origins in the Greek Thought. Most of the disciplines were studied under the banner of Philosophy hence the name, ‘Mother of all Sciences’. Afterwards different academic subjects made their own way into separate disciplines and Philosophy particularly studied Metaphysics, Epistemology, Logic, Ethics and Aesthetics. The intent behind the study of Philosophy was neither entertainment nor amusement. It was a way of pursuing the truth. Will Durant eloquently describes the importance of this discipline in these words, “There is a pleasure in philosophy, and a lure even in the mirages of metaphysics, which every student feels until the coarse necessities of physical existence drag him from the heights of thought into the mart of economic strife and gain. Most of us have known some golden days in the June of life when philosophy was in fact what Plato calls it, “that dear delight”; when the love of a modestly elusive Truth seemed more glorious, incomparably, than the lust for the ways of the flesh and the dross of the world”.¹

Pursuit of Truth, God as the Absolute Truth

When the sages and seers of philosophy started this intellectual endeavor, their primary intention was the pursuit of truth. For most of the major world religions, God is the Absolute Reality and the Truth, and finding Him is the main purpose of the human life. Many great philosophers also came to the conclusion that there is a fundamental Being who is self-existing and necessary and everything depends on Him. When a human being begins his metaphysical journey to find the truth and discern the facts, he uses his intellect primarily. As an example, consider a person who is not raised in a religious environment but upon reaching adulthood he starts to think about the fundamental nature of reality. He has to apply philosophical and logical thinking to come to any conclusion. Islam propounds that the sound reasoning always leads a person to acknowledge the existence and oneness of God. This was the theme of the novel of a famous Muslim philosopher Ibn Tufayl. In his novel namely ‘Hayy bin Yaqzan’ Ibn Tufayl narrates the story of a man who was totally cutoff from humanity but through reason and mystical practices reaches to the conclusion that behind all this ephemeral physical reality, there is a Supreme Being who is the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe.²

It is not strange that most of the philosophers in ancient Greece rejected the pagan beliefs of the masses and out rightly denied idol worship. The great philosopher Aristotle through his reasoning reached to the conclusion that God is One and the Prime Mover. He described God as the Final Causeless Cause. Ibn Rushd among the Muslim philosophers and Saint Thomas Aquinas from the Christians used Aristotelian logic and reasoning to describe and prove the existence and the unity of God. It is evident that Aristotle did not follow any revelation and that's why reason alone is not infallible and omniscient. But both Ibn Rushd and Thomas Aquinas believed in the Abrahamic revelations and they took help from Aristotle's philosophy in elaborating what was already stated in the Bible and the Quran.

Qur'an as a Divine Philosophy – Qur'anic Metaphysics, Epistemology and Ethics

What does it mean when we say Revelation from God or Qur'an is a Divine Philosophy? We are not using the term 'philosophy' here as an academic discipline or a way of knowing without Divine Guidance. It's here used in its literal and technical meaning suggesting, 'love of wisdom' and 'to know what is'. Qur'an has given a lot of emphasis on 'Hikmah' or Wisdom. Wisdom is defined as the ability to make sensible decisions and give good advice because of the experience and knowledge that one has.³ Quran mentions on several occasions that wisdom is an essential and inseparable part of the revelation. Teaching wisdom has been the mission of all the prophets of Allah. Quran mentions, "It is He who has sent among the unlettered a Messenger from themselves reciting to them His verses and purifying them and teaching them the Book and Wisdom – although they were before in clear error."⁴ The mission of the last and final Messenger of Allah is no different than the previous prophets in essence. Here we come to know that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was taught Revelation and Wisdom by God which he then taught to people. Wisdom is a faculty of reason and through it we understand and grasp the meaning of the Revelation of God. The best and infallible explanation of the Qur'anic verses were provided by the Prophet himself, that's why Sunnah and Hadith is a major source of wisdom or Hikmah. This shows that the literal meaning of the word 'philosophy' 'love of wisdom' is appropriate and as per the norms of revelation.

Now coming to the technical meaning of the word ‘philosophy’. “Philosophy is the use of reason in understanding such things as the nature of the real world and existence, the use and limits of knowledge, and the principles of moral judgement”⁵

Now let us apply these definitions of philosophy to the Qur’anic worldview. Qur’an at several places urges us to use our God given reason to understand the nature of the real world as the creation of God. Existence is a creation made by the Will and Volition of God. Qur’an also states that there are limits to knowledge as far as reason is concerned. The Holy Book also laid the foundation of objective morality by which individuals and society have to conduct themselves. There is major difference between revelation and reason as per the Qur’anic epistemology. Revelation is the highest and infallible source of knowledge as it is God Almighty communicating His Message to infallible persons known as prophets and messengers. Immediately after revelation Quran gives utmost importance to Reason as authority or Hujjah. Here are some verses highlighting the importance of reason in determining the truth or falsehood of the matter. Qur’an predicts the laments of the people in hell when they will say “And they will say: Had we listened or used our reason, we would not have been among the dwellers of hell”⁶

Allah the Exalted said also: “Have they not travelled through the land, and have the hearts wherewith, to understand and ears wherewith to hear? Verily it is not the eyes that grow blind, but it is the hearts which are in the breasts that grow blind”⁷

God in this verse instigates humanity to travel and experience, observe the conditions of the societies and see clearly what mistakes they made due to which they declined and fell into animalistic desires. Emphasis is especially given on understanding and reasoning. This verse clearly shows that al-Aql is an inherent nature and quality in person, a gift of God Almighty to him, by which he acquires knowledge of the nature of things, the knowledge of good and evil. His action in this regard is guided by the rule of wisdom. Al-Aql should not imply what philosophers speak of abstract intellects; it is illusions and conjecture of the peripatetic philosophy, diving without guidance. Islam puts limits on the faculty of reason as much of the unguided philosophy is based on the conjecture and speculation of the academic philosophers. So we see that thinking, reasoning and reflecting is the essential key that leads us to Allah- and He repeatedly instructs us in the Qur’an to reflect upon and ponder the universe. In Surah Aal-Imran it says:

“Surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of the night and day are signs for people of understanding, those who remember Allah while standing, sitting or reclining, and reflect in the creation of the heavens and the earth, (saying): “Our Lord! You have not created this in vain. Glory to you! Save us, then, from the chastisement of the Fire!”⁸

Reflection, contemplation, thinking and meditating on the creation of God is a method by which a person with sound reasoning and intellect infers the Existence and Oneness of God. This intellectual process is known as ‘tafakkur’ in Quranic terminology. Moreover, as the verses of the Quran are called ‘Ayaat’ or signs of God, similarly the animate and inanimate entities and things in the Universe are also called the signs of God. If Quran is the Word of God, Nature is the Work of God and both lead us to the Divine Truth. These Holy verses teach us that we can use the God given faculty of understanding, reflection and pondering over the universe which will specifically lead us to discover the reality of Allah’s existence. When we see the perfect order and balance in the creation, it leads to the conclusion that there must be a creator- who must have created all things, and hence, there must be an accounting.

Qur’an describes the main qualities of the believers in this verse, “When they are reminded of the signs of their Lord, they do not turn deaf”⁹ We have been also commanded to ponder over the historical events not as an amusement of storytelling, but to learn the important lessons from history and earlier civilizations. Holy Qur’an states, “Have they not traveled in the land that they may observe the end of those who were before them? Certainly, the abode of the Hereafter is much better for the God-fearing. Do you not then reflect?”¹⁰

An eminent Islamic Scholar, Dr. Yusuf Dalhat has provided a precise and thorough significance of Aql in Islamic Creed and Shari’ah in these words, “In Islam, the significance of al-Aql cannot be over-emphasized. It plays a key role in recognizing the prophetic mission of Prophets of Allah the Exalted. Moreover, people who are insane are exempted from religious obligations, the Messenger of Allah is reported to have said: “The pen has been lifted from writing the deeds of three (individuals): the one who is asleep until he awakes, a minor child until he reaches puberty, and the insane until he regains sanity” (Ahmad related). Meanwhile, al-Aql is the compelling force by which man understands life as a trust

as well as a gift, of which man is under obligation to use it as a capital to do righteousness by following the teachings of the Scripture. Those who believe in the oneness of Allah are surely wise and heedful to the Fitrah (the inherent nature of Islam) with which Allah created all mankind. The Prophet said: “Every newborn baby is born on al-Fitrah (inherent nature of Islam), but his parents convert him to Judaism or Christianity or Zoroastrian, as an animal gives birth to a perfect young animal baby, do you find it mutilated?” (Bukhari related). This is a clear testimony that man is likely to believe in the oneness of Allah, unless his mind was corrupted by the beliefs of his society. This is because; knowledge of the oneness of Allah the Exalted is axiomatic truth which one naturally grasps. But due to the presence of illusions and temptations in this world which get mixed up with the truth, Allah the Exalted sends Prophets and Messengers to keep this Aql away from deviating and perversion.”¹¹

As already stated briefly, if the Divine Guidance has not reached an individual, the sole epistemic basis for acquiring knowledge for him is Intellect and Intuition by God’s Grace based on his honest pursuit of Truth and mental exertion. Once a person realizes the Truth of the Revelation of God, he has to accept it in its totality. Afterwards the reason will be secondary source of knowledge for him and Qur’an or the Infallible Revelation of God will be the Primary Source of acquiring knowledge. Let us consider an example of a person who is totally immersed in his religion, especially from an Abrahamic perspective, and does not study or even consider the possibility of the True Prophecy of Muhammad (SAW). If he decides, by the Grace of God, to search and go on a journey of discovering the True Faith, he has to examine the claims of Prophet Muhammad. He has to use his scriptural knowledge and intellect both to know the infallibility of this great Messenger of Allah. Similarly a person who believes in the Doctrine of Trinity has to use his intellect to see the clear contradiction in the Doctrine of a Triune God and come to the conclusion that God is only One Person, not three persons in One God. So both scriptural and intellectual study will lead him to uncompromising Monotheism and the Universal Prophecy of the Last and Final Messenger of God, Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

Let’s take another example of an avowed atheist who denies the existence of God. The personality who comes to my mind is a great philosopher of the 20th century,

Antony Flew. He was a hardcore materialist and atheist for forty years and debated with many theists and wrote philosophical books in support of atheism. But then he immersed himself in the study of DNA and came to the conclusion that DNA cannot be a product of unconscious nature and an intelligent designer should be the cause and author of this marvelous phenomenon. He accepted the existence of God and wrote a famous book, "There is a God" which shook the foundations of philosophical materialism, scientific naturalism and dogmatic atheism. This is a genuine example of applying mind, logic and reasoning and reaching to a valid conclusion. This is what Qur'an calls "Qalb al Saleem" and the correct use of the faculty of reasoning and the appropriate use and utility of the philosophical methodology.

About the Philosophical Teachings of the Holy Qur'an, famous scholar of Islam and an expert in Western and Muslim Philosophy, M.M. Sharif writes, "The Qur'an is a book essentially religious, not philosophical, but it deals with all those problems which religion and philosophy have in common. Both have to say something about problems related to the significance of such expressions as God, the world, the individual soul, and the inter-relations of these: good and evil, free-will, and life after death"¹²

But one important thing has to be added that Islam does not consider reason infallible and beyond mistakes. If reason reaches to the same conclusion and is compatible with Infallible Revelation, then it's called sound reasoning. Islamic Epistemology gives highest priority to Revelation as it is the direct communication of the Creator of the Universe. Humans are not omniscient and they necessarily have to rely on Divine Guidance. Revelation is the primal and infallible source of knowledge and reason comes next and it's not infallible. This can be demonstrated easily. We see that humans, who rely only on reason without any objective Divine Guidance, come to different and often contradictory conclusions by observing and analysing the same data. This proves that reason is not an unerring source of knowledge. In contrast the Revelation is always a composite whole and never contradicts itself. Humans who believe in Divine Command Theory are in agreement about the most fundamental and basic tenets of the Revelation. This necessarily has to be kept in mind while understanding the importance of reason.

Conclusion

In the above passages, we found similarities between the themes discussed in Religion and Philosophy and we shall conclude by emphasizing that Revelation is the highest and infallible source of knowledge and reason should be guided by the precepts of God Almighty. But there is no doubt that reason is peculiar to humans by which they can determine the truth and falsehood of many ideas and concepts. And if used correctly in an unbiased and unprejudiced manner, reason will always lead us to the Absolute Truth of the Divine Existence and Oneness. Furthermore, reason has such importance Islamically that an insane person is not bound by the shariah of Islam. Also a child whose reason is not fully developed yet is exempted from following the precepts of Allah the Exalted.

No doubt emotions play an important part in a human life but there should be a balance between emotions and reason otherwise if emotions are given a free hand our decisions and outcomes will be haphazard and chaotic. Islam fulfills both needs by satisfying the faculty of reason as well as emotions where both are regulated by the Divine Guidance. A person can reach to God through reason but then his emotions will be heightened in the love of God as our mystics have time and again showed. Reason devoid of the emotional attachment or love becomes a dry affair and love lights up and adorns the faculty of intellect. Companions of Rasulullah (SAW) acknowledged the Truth of the Prophecy of Muhammad (SAW) through reason as well as their emotional attachment with his loving personality.

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