

Concept of Knowledge in Quranic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge or act of knowing in its literal sense may be understood to have (something) in one's mind or memory as a result of experience or learning or information. The word knowledge in its literal or etymological sense can hardly explain the various levels of certitude involved in the numerous claims to knowledge. At times, these claims can be a posteriori, i.e. subject to a thorough rational or/ and empirical scrutiny and at times a priori, i.e., self-evident or true in themselves like the fundamental principles of mathematics. So far as knowledge in its conceptual or epistemological framework is concerned, various theories of knowledge have been put forth from time to time, in the intellectual paradigms of both the West and the East, which either lay emphasis on rationale or lay more emphasis on intuition. The Quranic concept of knowledge is neither exclusively rational in the classical sense of the word, nor empirical in its modern-Western sense. It is not even exclusively mystical. It is progressive and an evolutionary one which stems out of an ever-growing human urge for a more definite and certain knowledge of Reality. The present paper will try to study the holistic concept of knowledge as propounded in the Quran vis-à-vis other concepts of knowledge like ancient Greek or Indian and Modern western concepts of Knowledge.

1. Introduction

Islam has insisted that life is to be lived in a positive, gainful and effective manner and that an individual has deep obligations towards the collective welfare of the community. To achieve this objective it is essential to maintain a constant flow of knowledge. From the Quranic point of view, importance of knowledge has been dominant from the first very divine revelation. From the Quranic perspective, it has been the attribute of knowledge which has made Adam (the proto-type of man) as the distinguished creation rather 'the crown of creation'. Before the revelation of Quran, the concept of knowledge had been in a philosophized or in a mystified form dominated by the classical rationalism of Greeks. Quran not only broadened the concept and scope of knowledge but also inculcated in man tendencies to observe, contemplate, and ponder over the universe as a sign of God which ultimately resulted in the knowledge illumination and scientific temper during the medieval times. Quran not only laid great emphasis on the sense perception and intuition as the sources of knowledge but it also laid emphasis on the rationale faculty of man as the tool to understand divine wisdom and reality. The unique feature of the concept of knowledge from Quranic perspective has been the certitude in its content as being the word of Creator which provides some universal and trans-historical principles which provides an eternal conceptual framework for all sciences of knowledge. It was basically due to the Quranic episteme which influenced medieval Muslim intellectuals and scientists to contribute in almost every aspect of knowledge, learning and sciences which became latter on became a connecting thread between the modern developments in science and technology. Quranic perspective on knowledge is somewhat different from both the ancient Greeks and the modern western concept of knowledge as both are largely based on the human rationale and Quran being a

Divine revealed book provides very broad and comprehensive perspective on knowledge which guides man to the realization of reality.

2. Development of the Tradition of Knowledge (from Ancient Greeks to Post-Quran times):

Knowledge in its conceptual or epistemological framework is concerned, various theories of knowledge have been put forth from time to time in both the east and west. Given the Hellenistic roots of the western intellectual tradition, it hardly needs to be emphasized that the first and foremost systematic attempt towards providing a sound conceptual basis of Human knowledge with in this tradition began with Greeks, particularly with Socrates (d.399 B.C) and continued; albeit in different forms; with most of the post-Socratics including Platonists, Aristolians and highly eclectic Neo-Platonics. Notwithstanding the differences in their outward forms of argumentation, their entire concept of knowledge was essentially based on the notions of 'pure reason' or 'Rationalism'. So far as rationalist in its classical sense is concerned, it may be defined as an abstract thinking that acts independent of empirical evidence. For classical thinkers all knowledge had to be real and so as to be safeguard the reality of knowledge, it had to be guarded against deceptive appearances. Thus for them, the real knowledge had to be preview of pure reason, which was to be understood as an independent faculty potent with priori or self-evident principles that were taken as the basis of real knowledge in contrast to the information acquired by way of sense experience.

The distinction between reality as apprehended by pure and theoretical reason in contrast to reality as observed empirically was further exhibited in the mystic-philosophical school of Neo-Platonism. This highly eclectic school of thought,

originally founded by Ammonious Saccas, was later on developed by Plotinus of Alexandria (d. 270 A.D), who has been duly regarded within the classical tradition as “the last of the great philosophers of antiquity.” so far as the Islamic belief system is concerned, it is firmly grounded on the authority of Divine revelation (Quran) and as such could not be endlessly interpreted by means of pure reason, which in its classical context, as indicated earlier was an abstract thinking with its own standards of judgment and acting independent of empirical evidence. Further, with almost all of the classical thinkers this concrete world was mere profane. Plato considered it worthless in comparison to his ‘world of ideas and as regards Plotinus of Alexandria, he “considered his spatio-temporal appearance unimportant and was loath to talk about the accidents of his historical existence”ⁱⁱ. Contrary to this classical world-view, the Quran sees a purposeful reality in the creation of this world which has been created by Allah for just ends and not for idle sport, “We created not the heavens, the earth and all between them, merely in (idle) sport, We created them not except for just ends: But most of them do not know.”ⁱⁱⁱ”

By ascribing a sense of reality and purposefulness to this world, the Holy Quran duly asserts its anti-classical spirit. Quran in no way stands for overlooking the concrete sensory evidence in favor of phoney rationalism, although it encourages men of understanding to make best use of their rational faculty in the light of inputs provided by sensory evidence. It verily exhorts the believers to develop a keen insight into the phenomenal world and to look upon the natural phenomena as signs pointing towards the ultimate reality which is no other than God himself, “it is Allah who causeth the seed-grain and the date-stone to split and sprout. He causeth the living to issue from the dead. And He is the One to cause the dead to issue from the living. That is Allah: then how are you deluded away from the truth.”^{iv}”

Thus within the orderly creation of the world and in a fact in every aspect of nature that comes within the preview of sense experience-the men of belief to see the signs of Allah’s reality. Even the examples of a gnat or a honey bee are not insignificant in one’s quest of realizing the creative wisdom of Allah, “Allah disdains not to use the similitude of things, even of a gnat as well as anything above it. Those who believe know that it is the truth from their Lord”^v”

It is this empirical attitude of the Holy Quran which manifests itself in the careful observation of the highest and the lowest of Allah’s creation. This attitude stands in the sheer antagonism to the classical attitude of undermining the phenomenal world and the consequent empirical knowledge or for that matter; to the hyper mystical world view of Hindus that world is a mere illusion or a mental aberration (Maya)- a concept which has been popularly ascribed to the Brahma Sutra of Samkara^{vi}.

So far as the most important fallout of the classical philosophy, and particularly that of Plotinus is concerned, it had “the defect of encouraging men to look within rather than to look without...it was this temperament of looking within rather than ‘looking without’ that became a vital part of Christian theology and historically important as an influence in moulding the Christianity of the middle ages and of Christian theology”^{vii}”

In contrast to the entire foregoing, the spirit of reflective observation and experimentation as is evident from the verses of the Quran, ushered an era of bold investigation and scientific

development in the Muslim world. Prompted by the spirit of Quranic empiricism on one hand and on the other, by the progressive needs of an ever-growing civilization, the Muslim scientists contributed a lot to the fields of astronomy, astrology, alchemy, geography, history, mathematics, medicine, fine-arts, optics and much more. It was this scientific development based on the ideals of empiricism and thorough investigation into the natural phenomena, which eventually influenced the Christian west to build its civilization edifice on the same world-view. As regards the powerful impact of the scientific feats achieved by Muslims upon these heavy weights of western scientific tradition, right from Roger Bacon to Francis Bacon, we can do no better than to present a passage from Briffault’s Making of Humanity as has been quoted by Muhammad Iqbal in his The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam; wherein he says:

Neither Roger Bacon nor his later name sake has any title to be credited with having introduced the experimental method. Roger Bacon was no more than one of the apostles of Muslim science and method to Christian Europe; and he never wearied of declaring that knowledge of Arabic and Arabian science was for his contemplative the only way to true knowledge. Discussions as to who was the originator of the experimental method... are part of the colossal misrepresentation of the origins of European civilization. The experimental method of the Arabs was by Bacon’s time wide spread and eagerly cultivated throughout Europe^{viii}.

3. Impact of Quranic epistemology on the Development of Islamic Civilization:

With the Quran as the fountain head of its thought and practice, Islamic civilization became the precursor of scientific development in the west. Quran initiated a refreshingly open and dynamic approach to knowledge which brought about far-reaching and revolutionary consequences not only for the Muslim community but for human civilization as a whole. Under the banner of Islam, the Arabs and the other people, who had been hitherto steeped in ignorance, barbarism and superstitions, emerged as torch-bearers of science and civilization. The intellectual revolution ushered in under the aegis of Islamic Civilization played a key role in the making of western civilization and the modern world^{ix}. The learned men of the west gained a lot from Islamic peoples, whether it was by way of their contacts with the later during the crusades or during time of peace by virtue of their advanced learning in the Muslim seminaries of Cordova and Sicily^x notwithstanding the serious setbacks that Islamic civilization received as a result of feudal and monarchical strife and also because of the un-Islamic ideals that had slowly crept into the fabric of Islamic society and polity, it nevertheless “remained the leader of humanity for about eight centuries.” But later on, as a due repercussion of the multifarious internal and external causes; and more so because of the Mongol invasion which felt like a catastrophe upon the Muslim world, and nonetheless because of the later colonizing mission upon which the west went berserk in the entire Islamdom in the 19th and 20th centuries., Muslims no longer dared to look, with an inquisitive mind, upon the real and concrete but rather painful world around them. The loss of political power and territorial integrity brought about a sense of defeat in the Muslims, which in part manifested itself in the form of an intellectual degeneration. The Muslims rather

took recourse to escapism which meant an abstinence from the life full of vigour, activity and the spirit of scientific enquiry.

On the other hand, the west which had taken the attitude of empiricism from the Islamic world, began to think of this attitude in isolation from its peculiar setting. The Quran had stood for the empirical study of the phenomena per se and not in relation to the ultimate reality. With the west, empiricism no longer remained an attitude of providing perspective and purposefulness to the study of worldly phenomena. It got degenerated into an attitude of studying the things per se, with the ultimate aim of utilizing them for the immediate material or corporal needs. With the result a sense of blind materialism got appended with the empirical and the consequent scientific knowledge in the West. This trend ultimately resulted in, "facts replaced understanding; and knowledge, split into a thousand isolated fragments, no longer generated wisdom"^{xiii}

Once inert matter and its observable causes and effects became the sole purpose of scientific activity, the material scientist began seek reality 'piecemeal', i.e., within the isolated sets of facts and events guided by material instances. He could no longer think of reality as an 'organic whole' guided by an all pervading creative wisdom. Nothing different from the material sciences became the position of social sciences in the secular west. They too came to be heavily guided by the arbitrary methods of historical causation and dialectical materialism. Thus, the entire concept of knowledge within the secular west became an uncoordinated corpse of facts with no unifying and definitive purpose of seeking the ultimate reality of all being and existence. As a matter of fact this aimless empiricism which exclusively sought the concrete and material aspect of reality was in principle nothing different from the notions of classical rationalism, which in turn as already mentioned stood only for seeking the ideal or immaterial aspect of reality.

In contrast to the classical rationalism and secular empiricism being the mutually exclusive approaches the Quran stands for a more integrated approach towards knowledge. It tries to combine careful observation and experimentation with what is best in rational faculty by way of understanding and comprehension. In Quranic epistemology a sound comprehension may provide a definitive purpose and an intrinsic vastness to a careful process of experimentation. Likewise an empirical attitude and a general feeling of respect for sensory evidence is regarded essential for making reason compatible with the concrete realities of the world and thereby preventing reason from getting lost into abstruse idealism. Thus by combining sound reflection as it pertains to the rational faculty with that of sound observation as corresponding to a healthy empiricism, the Quran wants to develop an overall attitude of 'reflective observation' in a believer. But all said, it nevertheless, remains to be emphasized that even this method of reflective observation, which integrates both the rational and empirical approaches to knowledge is not an endpoint within the epistemology of the Holy Quran. In fact the Quran never denies the endless possibilities of human ego to go much higher in its pursuit for the ultimate knowledge. By taking the urge of human ego to grow and evolve to its fullest possible extent as a necessary standpoint, the Quran reaffirms the validity of a more direct and more certain source of knowledge, i.e., Wahi which is often translated as revelation.

4. Quranic Perspective on the Sources of Knowledge:

To sum up the entire foregoing, it may be said that the Quran cherishes all the fruitful modes of acquiring knowledge whether it is by virtue of revelation, mystic experience, and sense perception or through the reasoning and contemplation. The Quranic concept of knowledge is neither exclusively rational in the classical sense of the word, nor empirical in its modern-western sense. It is not even exclusively mystical. It is a progressive and evolutionary one which stems out of an ever growing human urge for a more definite and certain knowledge of reality. It is this urge for the progressive growth and evolution in knowledge that has been expressed in a simple yet beautiful Quranic supplication, "O my Lord! Increase me in knowledge."^{xiii} within the Quranic epistemology, this sincere quest for knowledge begins with a keen observation of our own selves and the world around us and passes through the phase of deeper reflection up on these phenomena as the signs points towards the divine reality, "Soon will we show them our signs in the (furthest) regions (of the earth), and in their own souls, until it becomes manifest to them that is the truth"^{xiii}

Our own selves and the phenomenal world around us provide our rational faculty with sufficient indirect evidence regarding the existence of the Ultimate divine reality. Yet this indirect evidence is only supplementary to seer's sincere quest for a more direct and immediate realization of the ultimate reality. It is this immediate realization of the higher truth falls within the preview of mystic experience. Last but not the least, the fruits of knowledge achieved by man while moving ahead with in this graded scheme of knowledge must every now and then be corroborated with and ultimately seen in the light of divine revelation, whose essentially self-evident nature is an ontological proof of its certitude and authenticity.

5. Conclusion:

While discussing the concept of knowledge in Islam, it has to be borne in mind that Quran makes the use of Arabic word '*ilm*' to signify knowledge. The root-meanings of *ilm* are: a mark, a sign like the country's flag, or a signpost, or a track-mark etc, with which things are distinguished or recognized. It means therefore, to know something in all its details, to cognize, to perceive reality, to have faith, to realize, to have sure and definite knowledge^{xiv}. It is this certitude of knowledge which is cherished by the Holy Quran in contrast to the knowledge based on mere opinion, conjecture, guess work or knowledge that is based on transitory emotions or passions. The Quran stands for exact and real knowledge and does not unduly differentiates between the religious and the worldly knowledge. Even the study of philosophy and natural sciences, if studied with an eye towards comprehending the wisdom of Allah, is an act of devotion to be rewarded in the here-after. The only dichotomy recognized is that which exists between *al-ilm-un-nafi* (the profitable and useful knowledge) and *al-ilm-ul-la yanfa* (the knowledge that gives no profit). The profitable knowledge is definitely one which makes a man to realize the ultimate purpose of his existence and which elevates a man in the sight of Allah. According to the Holy Quran it is this fruitful knowledge which has been potentially engrained in Adam during his meta-historical existence, "And He [Allah] taught Adam the names of all the things"^{xv}.

References and End notes:

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