

The Authority of Intellect and its Function from the Perspective of the Holy Qur'an

MAJID MAAREF¹

Full Professor, Department of Qur'an and Hadith, Tehran University, Tehran, Iran.

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ABSTRACT:

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The Holy Qur'an introduces the concept of intellect as an instrument for thinking and recognizing the facts and in several verses with different expressions, insists on activating the intellect by human. In order to convey this issue precisely and deeply to the audience, The Qur'an has used many synonymous and close concept to intellect, such as tafakur (thinking), qalb (heart), lubb (heart of the matter), nuhā (understanding), hijr (evidence), hilm (reason) and fiqh (realization). The authority of the intellect in recognizing facts has been confirmed in the Qur'an and Islamic traditions. One of the most important subject matters that should be identified by the intellect is the domain of beliefs and theology, which also leads to the perception of the prophetic mission and resurrection. Another issue perceived by the intellect is the realm of recognizing moral virtues. According to several verses and traditions, human intellect can discern good and evil, regardless of religious teachings, although some Islamic sects do not believe in this. It can be said that the power of intellect in human is like an intrinsic prophet whose discernment is authoritative and in agreement with the guidance of the prophets. Thus, from the Qur'an's point of view, the realm of intellect in knowing facts is a vast scope which comprises various subjects such as theology, ontology, anthropology and ethics.

KEYWORDS: The Qur'an and intellect, Authority of Intellect, recognizing the facts, identifying the beliefs, discernment of moral virtues.

1. Corresponding author. E-mail address: maaref@ut.ac.ir

I. Introduction

One of the human characteristics enabling him/her to know the unknown is the power of intellect and thought. The word intellect (*'aql*) is not attested in the Qur'an in an infinitive form but its verbal derivatives have been employed in the Qur'an verses with forms like *na'qilu*, *ta'qilūn*, *'aqalūhu*, and *ya'qilūn* about 50 times.

In these verses, assuming the concept of intellect as an instrument for thinking and learning about the facts, the holy Qur'an has mostly insisted on activating the intellect, i.e., reasoning (*ta'qqul*). Mentioning thus the wonders of the world of being, it considers them as signs for those who employ their intellect. For example, it is stated in verse (Q.2:164),

“Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, in the alternation of the night and the day, in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind, in the rain which Allah sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead, in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth, in the change of the winds and the clouds which they trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth (here) indeed are signs for a people that are wise.”

For this very reason, the Qur'an has compared those who have deprived themselves from thinking with animals (Q.8:22):

For the worst of beasts in the sight of Allah are the deaf and the dumb, those who understand not. It announces the result of negligence in applying the intellect to know the facts as ill-fated destiny and arrival into the hell (Q.67:10): They will further say: Had we but listened or used our intelligence, we should not now be among the companions of the blazing fire.

2. Synonyms of Intellect and Related Concepts

Another theme which reveals the position of the intellect in the Qur'an is to pay attention to the synonyms and related concepts with intellect which has a broad and prevailing application in the Qur'an verses.

Some of the most important of these words are:

- Thought (*Fikr*) and Thinking (*Tafakur*):

Then to eat of all the produce of the earth and follow the ways of thy Lord made smooth, there issues from within their bodies a drink of varying colors wherein is healing for men, verily in this is a sign for those give thought (Q.16:69).

- Heart (*Qalb*):
There will be for them therein all that they wish and there is more with us (Q.50:35).
- Heart of the Matter (*Lubb*, singular form of *Albāb*):
Behold, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day, there are indeed signs for men of understating (Q.3:190).
- Understanding (*Nuhā*):
Eat for yourselves and pasture your cattle, verily in this are signs for men endowed with understanding (Q.20:54).
- Evidence (*Hijr*):
Is there not in these an adjuration or evidence for those who understand (Q.89:5).
- Reason (*Hilm*, singular form of *Ahlām*):
Does their reason tell them to say this or is it because they are a rebellious people?(Q.52:32)
- Realization (*Fiqh*):
Many are the Jinns and men we have made for Hell: they have hearts wherewith they understand not, eyes wherewith they see not and ears wherewith they hear not. They are like cattle, nay more misguided for they are heedless of warning (Q.7:179).

The symmetrical meaning of these terms with the term ‘intellect’ could be seen in the works by these scholars: Ibn Manẓūr (1989, 1:685), Ibn Fāris (1969, 5:17), Ibn Athīr (1985, 1:433), al-Qummī (1983, 2:419), al-Jawharī (1986, 2:138). The other point in knowing the meaning and the truth of the intellect is paying attention to the antonyms.

The most important antonym to intellect is ignorance (*jahl*), a term widely attested the verses and traditions and for this reason, al-Kulaynī has started his work entitled “The Book of *al-Kāfi* (The Sufficient Book)” with a chapter devoted to Intellect and Ignorance and thereby, he narrates traditions from the religious leaders to show the contradiction of intellect and ignorance.

One of these traditions, is a speech from Imam al-Riḍā (AS) who has stated, *Everyone’s friend is his intellect and his enemy is his ignorance* (al-Kulaynī, 1984, 1:11). It can be said in the contrast of intellect and ignorance that intellect becomes closer to the meaning of knowledge and

those who exhibit the power of intellect in themselves, they are captivated in the bush of ignorance. So, Joseph (Yūsuf) describes his brothers while kidnapping him and throwing him into the well as ignorant: *He said, are you aware of what you did with Joseph and his brother, when you were ignorant?* (Q.12:89).

In some verses and traditions, intellect has been used the opposite of stupidity, for instance those who were disclaiming the religion of Abraham which in the interoperation of the Qur'an have been termed as foolish: *And who turns away from the religion of Abraham but such as debase their souls with folly? Him we chose and rendered pure in this world and he will be in the Hereafter in the ranks of the righteous* (Q.2:130).

In a wise statement, Imam 'Alī (AS) states: *Intellect is a source of proximity to God and stupidity is a source of distance from Him* (Āmidī, 2001, 111).

The last point in this part is that intellect in the Islamic teachings is relative, in that it falls within the two ends of the spectrum. It is such that some of the humans have been depicted as people in lack of intellect and in contrast, some others have been regarded as the wisest of people. Features such as fear of God, being submitted to the divine commandments, avoiding committing sins, tolerance in dealing with people, awareness of one's faults, and adopting silence are the signs of wisdom to the extent that when an individual becomes skilled with these features, he will enjoy a position higher than intellect and wisdom (Āmidī, 2001, nos. 960-976).

3. Authority of the Intellect in Verses and Traditions

The holy Qur'an has been sent down to guide the human and all people are thus addressed by the Qur'an:

Ramadan is the month in which We sent down the Qur'an, as a guide to mankind, also clear signs for guidance and judgment between right and wrong, so every one of you who is present at his home, during that month, should spent it in fasting. But if anyone is ill, or on a journey, the prescribed period should be made up by days later. Allah intends every facility for you. He does not want to put you to difficulties. (He wants you) to complete the prescribed period and to glorify Him. In that He has guided you and perchance ye shall be grateful (Q.2:185).

But it is clear that the wise and the reasonable grasp the messages of the Qur'an faster than others. So, concerning the understanding of the wise

about the facts of the universe, the holy Qur'an states:

Behold, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day, there are indeed signs for men of understating (Q.3:190).

In the same manner, in various verses, the Qur'an invites people to pay attention to the existing wonders in the universe – including heavens and the earth and even the existence of human (e.g. 51:20-22, 41:5, 88:17-20, 16:69). Further, the Qur'an rebukes those who have accepted the beliefs based only upon imitation of their fathers, rather than employing their own intellect and wisdom to learn about the facts (Tabataba'i, 1982, 1:420). It states,

And when it is said to them, "Follow what God has sent down," they say, "No, but we will follow such things as we found our fathers doing." What? And if their fathers had no understanding of anything, and if they were not guided? The likeness of those who disbelieve is as the likeness of one who shouts to that which hears nothing, save a call and a cry (a beast) deaf, dumb, blind they do not understand (Q.2:170-171).

According to some of the verses, human can attain the knowledge of facts through two methods: One is to listen to the prophets' and the counsels and guidance of the wise, and the other is to use his own intellect and understanding in learning about the universe and its wonders. Failing to follow these two courses, he will be like animals and will regret in the Hereafter. The infidels are quoted as saying,

They will further say: Had we but listened or used our intelligence, we should not (now) be among the companions of the blazing fire. They will then confess their sins: But far from Allah's mercies are the companions of the blazing fire (Q.67:10-11).

The result of all the verses which were present is that intellect in human existence is a reliable instrument whereby facts may be learned. The Qur'an recognizes the result of human intellect, since the Qur'an invites human to turn towards employing the intellect and think, but the result of his intellect and thought is lack of access to facts which will be of no avail. *The Qur'an is wise (Q.36:1) and it is a book which has been sent down by the wise God (Q.46:2).* With such Qur'anic confirmation of the intellect and reasoning, the intellect in the human existence is converted into evidence, by which human will be questioned on the day of resurrection about his failure to employing his intellect, rather for his obeying his passions and lusts. The holy Qur'an says,

Many are the Jinns and men we have made for Hell. They have hearts wherewith they understand not, eyes wherewith they see not, and ears wherewith they hear not. They are like cattle – nay more misguided for they are heedless of warning (Q.7:179).

Apart from the verses by which the authority of intellect is easily understandable, among the Islamic traditions, there is a unique tradition on the authority of the intellect by the Seventh Imam. In this long tradition which has been included by Muḥammad ibn Ya‘qūb al-Kulaynī in the book of “The Intellect and the Ignorance,” with a reference to the Qur’an verses about intellect, its significance and function in human existence has been discussed.

In a part of the tradition, the Imam announces the philosophy of appointment of the prophets (PBUH) to nurture human intellect.¹ More knowledgeable Individuals will be the best people responding to the call and mission of the prophets and will acquire the highest degrees in the world and Hereafter proportional to their intellect and wisdom (al-Kulaynī, 1984, 1:16). However, the most important phrase of Imam al-Kāzīm’s (AS) tradition is:

God had put two authorities for every human: an apparent authority (outside his being) and Inner authority (inside him), the apparent authority includes the prophets and Imams and the inner authority is the peoples’ intellects (ibid.).

There is a similar tradition from Imam al-Riḍā (AS), when Ibn al-Sikkīt, asks him, “What authority does exist for people today?” the Imam states,

The authority of intellect, because it is in the light of intellect that one who assumes truthfulness towards God and believes in Him is distinguished from one who assumes falsehood towards God and denies Him. Ibn al-Sikkīt says, “By God that this response is true” (al-Ṭabrisī, 1989, 2:433).

4. *The Role of Intellect in Knowing the Facts*

Referring to the verses of the Qur’an and Islamic traditions, the role of intellect and its function in learning about the facts is clarified. The facts which are the subject-matters of knowing the intellect have various branches and diversities of which their main three themes are pointed out below.

1. That is, according to the interpretation of ‘Alī (AS) in *Nahj al-Balāghah* which announces the prophetic mission as “One of the objectives of the prophetic mission was to free the treasures of reason from superstitious” (Sayyid al-Raḍī, 2005, 1st Sermon).

4.1. *The Role of Intellect in Acquiring the Cognition of Beliefs*

The most important field of acquiring the cognition of the facts is the domain of human beliefs and issues which are related to his philosophy of creation, in this domain, theology, ontology in the philosophical sense, perception of the prophetic mission and eschatology exist. Understanding this matter that the universe has a creator and that creator has created the universe based on wisdom and grace and the universe has a course and motion to attain one day to its ultimate location and resurrection, all and all are within the domain of rational cognition (for a detailed discussion, see Sobhani, 2004, 3:299).

According to the verses of the holy Qur'an, theology lies in human innate nature as well as in the material life. Human beings sometimes happen to be forgetful and they sometimes incline towards imaginative idols. It is in these cases that by addressing the recipient of the message, the Qur'an invites them to form a rational judgment,

Then is He who creates like one who does not create? So will you not be reminded? (Q.16:17)

And elsewhere,

Or were they created by nothing, or were they the creators [of themselves]? (Q.52:35)

The first phrase refers to the causality rule and that no phenomenon can be without any cause and the second phrase is referring to the circle and that self-creation results in a vicious circle (Sobhani, 2004, 3:300). Theology in the prophetic missions has also been associated with using the rational reasoning of which one sample is Abraham's monotheism. In facing his tribe, he announced that the setting of stars, the moon and the sun would be the signs of instability and weakness in an object of worship; consequently, he directed his attention towards God who is the creator of heavens and the earth. In confronting with idolatry, he attacked idols by an ax and destroyed them but he left aside the big idol as the annihilators of other idols to make people understand that idols are not able to create profit or damage.

In a debate with Nimrod, asking him to make the sun shine from the west instead of the east, he astonished him in bewilderment (for details see, 6:74-79, 2:258, 21:58-66).

Here a question might arise and that is with regard to the cognition of God through the introduction made by the prophets – what is the role of

intellect in the cognition of the God? Are narrative teachings the bases for acquiring the cognition of beliefs? In response, it can be said that prophets by their prophetic missions and through their miracles have proved their truthfulness and present their teachings to the public. In other words, presenting miracles is the proof for truthfulness of the prophets. But what has been the cause for understanding a miracle as something different from things like magic and magic tricks? Is there any other force apart from the power of intellect to be able to understand the miracle and consequently the truthfulness of the prophets?

Thus, the role of intellect in cognition of beliefs becomes clear. If theology is at the top of the beliefs obtained through rational reasoning, it is possible to consider the perception of other beliefs such as the cognition of the prophet, Imam, and eschatology.

4.2. The Role of Intellect in Acquiring the Cognition of Entity and Nature

There are many verses in the Qur'an encouraging people to think and contemplate on the wonders existing in nature and even human organs. Instances include:

And on the earth are signs for the certain [in faith], And in yourselves. Then will you not see? (Q.51:20-21).

The phrase *then will you not see* is to see with the eye of human's heart and being which is in fact the same rational attitude. From the perspective of the Qur'an, the whole universe is full of the signs of divine omnipotence, e.g.,

And how many a sign within the heavens and earth do they pass over while they, there from, are turning away (Q.12:105).

The method of the Qur'an is to name one or many phenomena on certain occasions and announces that there are signs in these phenomena for the wise. The phenomena about which the Qur'an invites the wise to think include the following:

Creation of heavens and the earth; succession of day and night; movement of ships in the seas; rain generating clouds; winds blowing; raining; revival of nature; germination of flowers and plants; honey bees and their location finding on the heights and producing honey; creation of human and wonders of the creatures in the creation of human, such as various colors and languages (for details, see 2:164, 16:69; 30:20-27, 3:190).

The Qur'anic phrases such as *"Most surely there are signs in this for people who ponder"* or *"Most surely there are signs in this for people who*

reflect” show this reality that by rational thinking about the phenomena of the universe, in addition to access the laws of nature, it is possible to grasp the divine power in the creation of the phenomena and that the world of creation has not been created by accident and in vain.

4.3. *The Role of Intellect in Understanding Ethics and Its Standards*

Another them that falls, from the viewpoint of the Qur'an, within the realm of cognition of the intellect is ethics and its standards. From the Qur'anic perspective, drawing a distinction between the good and evil and distinguishing virtues from vices have been inherently entrusted in human beings. The Qur'an states,

And [by] the soul and He who proportioned it, and inspired it [with discernment of] its wickedness and its righteousness (Q.91:7-8).

Thus, human intellect, irrespective of religious laws and teachings, is able to know the good and bad and, in general, virtues and vices. *And have shown him the two ways?* (Q.90:10) means the two ways of good and evil. This Qur'anic concept was then discussed by Muslim theologians under the topic of “rational goodness and badness.” Some traditionists (*ahl al-hadith*) and Ash'aris considered the denial of competency of intellect in the domain of ethics and distinguish between good and evil, but in contrast, Mu'tazilis and Twelver Shi'is, while confirming the competency of intellect, believe in the rational good and evil (Hasani, 1990, 263).

This means that human intellect can distinguish virtues from vices. In other words, the human intellect considers qualities such as justice, righteousness, staying true to one's word, cooperation with others as affairs being favorable innately and recognizes them as virtues and the religious decree is nothing but confirmation and reinforcement of the rational decree in the domain of ethical issues. This is reflected in verses such as:

Indeed, Allah orders justice and good conduct and giving to relatives and forbids immorality and bad conduct and oppression. He admonishes you that perhaps you will be reminded (Q.16:90).

The command of the Qur'an is to observe the ethical issues and distance from the vices is nothing but emphasizing and innate and rational understanding of human virtues.

Another point is that ethics, in the view of the scientist and scholars, is divided into two theoretical ethics and practical ethics. Theoretical ethics means knowledge about ethical standards and attributes including good

and evil, virtues and vices, and by practical ethics obligation to observe the ethical virtues and distancing from the vices are intended. As intellect has necessary capabilities to distinguish virtues from vices, the decree of intellect, as the inner prophet of human, is to encourage human to observe ethical measures and distance from vices. In other words, the practical ethics in the human character relies upon the command of the practical intellect (For details, see Javadi Amoli, 2008, 44 & 68).

This is the same matter which has been pointed out in the tradition of Imam al-Şādiq (AS) as the definition of intellect: *Intellect is the same power, in light of which, the beneficent God is worshipped and the divine paradise is achieved* (al-Kulaynī, 1984, 1:11).

Finally, it is worth noting that with all competencies and capabilities which is provided for the intellect from the perspective of the Qur'an, the human intellect has certain limits and shortcomings which has not been discussed in this paper. Acquiring cognition and knowledge about the essence of the divine attributes, legislation of religious decrees, understanding the details of the religion and the philosophy of some of the commandments are among the matters which are not within the realm of human intellect, but human accepts them obediently in light of faith in God of the universe (for a detailed discussion on the limits of intellect, see Asef Agah, 2012, 188-195; Javadi Amoli, 2008, 56: Perceptual Restrictions of the Intellect in the Domain of Religion).

5. Conclusion

Reasoning, i.e., employing the intellect and its power in learning the facts of the universe has an important position in the Qur'anic verses.

In the Qur'anic verses and Islamic traditions, the power of intellect in human is like an inner prophet and the decrees and judgments of the intellect are thus valid and authoritative in agreement with the prophets' and Imams' guidance.

The realm of intellect in learning the facts is a vast one that encompasses an array of disciplines such as theology, ontology, anthropology, and ethics, i.e., to distinguish virtues from vices. The practical intellect also directs human to act upon virtues and stay away from vices.

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