



Instrumental Intellect in Islamic Tradition

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Abstract: As opposed to ignorance, concupiscence, and carnal desires, the intellect is a faculty that plays a major role in all categories of human knowledge within Islamic tradition; and it plays a provocative role as well. The intellect has three functions: theoretical, practical, and instrumental. Contrary to Hume's view, which was proposed in the course of affections, impressions, and inclinations, the instrumental function of intellect comes into play after its theoretical and practical functions. Indeed, the function of instrumental intellect is to manage man's livelihood according to the data of theoretical intellect and the ideals of practical intellect.

Introduction

By Islamic tradition sometimes we mean the verses of the Qur'an and the *ahadith* (sayings) of the Holy Prophet and his Ahl al-Bayt, and on other occasions we mean the views of Muslim scholars. In what follows, the author tries to clarify the concept of the instrumental intellect in light of Islamic *ahadith*; thus by Islamic tradition he means the *ahadith* of the Holy Prophet and his Ahl al-Bayt.

The root of *'aql* (intellect) and its derivations are used forty-nine times in the Qur'an; if we add the synonyms of *'aql*, such as *lubb* (intellect) and *tafakkur* (thinking), we might say that the meaning of intellect and its functions are mentioned in the Qur'an more than a hundred times.

The intellect is frequently discussed in Islamic narrations. These *ahadith* have dealt with many different issues of the intellect, such as the importance and status of the intellect, the relations between the intellect and the mind, the essence of the intellect, the meanings and functions of the intellect, the grades of intellect, the intellect of disposition and experience, the ties between intellect and faith, the intellect and

ethics, and the like. Some of these issues focus on the ontological dimension of the intellect while others focus on the epistemological aspect. The author has dealt here with one of the meanings and functions of intellect, namely the instrumental intellect, which concerns the epistemological dimension. The reason for this is that Muslim scholars have dealt solely with the theoretical and practical functions of the intellect, but have failed to notice its instrumental function despite all three functions being mentioned in Islamic *ahadith*. In order to clarify the meaning of instrumental intellect in light of the *ahadith*, we must first refer to the concept of intellect and its functions.

Intellect as a Deterrent to Ignorance

In Islamic *ahadith*, intellect has sometimes been used in opposition to concupiscence and carnal desire and sometimes to ignorance. From among the *ahadith* of the former group, mention can be made of a few narrations from Imam Ali in this respect:

God has endowed angels with intellect without concupiscence, and the beast with concupiscence without intellect, and the children of Adam with both

of them. Then he whose concupiscence is defeated by his intellect is better than the angels but he whose intellect is defeated by his concupiscence is worse than beasts.¹

The intellect is the master of the army of the Merciful and Almighty, [while] carnal desire is the commander of the army of Satan, and man's soul is oscillating between them.²

The intellect and concupiscence are contrary to each other. [GH 2100]

Concupiscence and lasciviousness have ruined his intellect.³

Fight against your carnal desire by your intellect.⁴

From among the second group of *ahadith*, mention can be made of the celebrated *hadith* that discusses the troops of intellect and ignorance. This narration states that God has created both intellect and ignorance in the nature of human beings and has allocated troops for each one. The troops of the intellect include goodness, faith, hope, justice, understanding, and ethical values; and the troops of ignorance include evil, faithlessness, despair, injustice, nescience, stupidity, and ethical vices. By the troops of intellect and ignorance the *hadith* apparently means their consequences, although they may strengthen the intellect or ignorance as well. Thus we find in *Nahj-u al-Balagha*:

There is no wealth like intellect and no poverty like ignorance. [NB 478]

From these two groups of *ahadith*, one can infer that (a) Ignorance has two different meanings: one is an ontological thing that is created in man, such as the

intellect, and the other is a negative concept, such as a lack of knowledge; (b) Ignorance is both lasciviousness and carnal desire and which in turn are also the consequences of ignorance; and (c) The intellect is the source of all good things, but ignorance is the cause of all vices. Indeed, if man follows his intellect in everything that he does, he will reach all good things; however, if he follows ignorance, he will be inclined to vice. This is why Prophet Muhammad purportedly said:

God has not distributed among human beings anything better than the intellect.⁵

It is noteworthy that this sense of ignorance comes from an Arabic root. Compare with Ibn Faras,

Ignorance has two main meanings: one sense is contrary to knowledge and the other is contrary to serenity.⁶

Having studied some Arabic poems and some verses of the Qur'an, the contemporary linguist and expert on Islam Toshihiko Izutsu mentions three meanings for the words ignorance and ignorant. In its first sense, an ignorant person has no self-control and follows his carnal desires, as opposed to a forbearing person. In its second sense, ignorance undermines the intellect. And in its last sense, it means a lack of knowledge.⁷ In brief, the intellect has a very broad sense in *ahadith* and all kinds of knowledge seem to come from the intellect. Sometimes directly, and sometimes indirectly through the organs of the senses, the intellect allows man to understand the realities. It can also be inferred from some *ahadith* that the intellect plays a few non-cognitive roles, such as command prohibition and positive spiritual pressure, by which man is provoked to do good, however this pressure does not deprive man of his free-will. On the contrary, ignorance and lasciviousness exert negative spiritual pressure on the soul, thus driving man to vice; again this pressure does not reach the extent of compulsion and lack of freedom.

As for the non-cognitive role of the intellect, Imam Ali states, "the intellect commands you towards what

¹ Muhammad Ibn Ali Saduq, *Ilal-u al-Shara'i*, Beirut: Dar-u Ihya-e al-Turath, 1385 L.A.H. p. 4; Ali Ibn Hasan Tabarsi, *Mishkat-u al-Anwar*, Najaf: Heydaryyah, 1385 L.A.H. p. 251; Muhammad Baqir Majlesi, *Bihar-u al-Anwar*, Beirut: Dar-u Ihya-e al-Trath, 1403 L.A.H. 60, p. 299.

² 'Abdulwahid Amudi, *Ghurar-u al-Hikam wa Durar-u al-Kalim*, commented by Jamal-u al-Din Khunsari, researched by Sayyid jalal-u al-Din Muhaddith Armawi, Tehran: Tehran University, 1360 A.H., No. 2099. [Henceforth cited as GH]

³ Muhammad Ibn Husain Sharif Radi, *Nahj-u al-Balaghah*, transl. Sayyid Ali Naqi Faid-u al-Islam, Tehran: Faqih, 1376 A.H., Sermon No. 86. [Henceforth cited as NB]

⁴ See Muhammad ibn Ya'qub Kulaini, *al-Kafi*, researched by Ali Akbar Ghaffari, Tehran: Dar al-Kutub-e al-Islamiyyah, 1388 L.A.H., Vol. 1, p. 28. [Henceforth cited as *a-K* with volume number]

⁵ Barqi, *al-Mahasen*, researched by Sayyid Mahdi Rajai, Qom: al-Majma'u al-'Alami liahl-i al-Beit, 1413 L.A.H., Vol. 1, p. 308.

⁶ Ahmad Ibn Fares, *Mu'jam-u Maqais-e al-Lughah*, researched by 'Abdulsalam Muhammad Harun, Egypt: al-Mustafa and his Children Publication, 1389 L.A.H., Vol. 1, p. 489.

⁷ Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur'an*, transl. Ahmad Aram, Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Farhang Islami, 1365, pp. 264-78.

is most beneficial.⁸ Other commentators point out, "A far-sighted man has deterrents from his intellect against any kind of meanness" (*GH* 7350), and "Men's hearts may be affected by bad thoughts but their intellect deters [bad thoughts] from them" (*GH* 7340). Also Imam Husain states, "You should know that the intellect is a deterrent."⁹ Indeed, 'aql means prohibition and deterrence in the Arabic language.¹⁰

Cognitive Functions of Intellect in Divine Tradition

The theoretical, practical, and instrumental functions of the intellect are mentioned in ahadith, however they have not made use of these exact terms.

By theoretical intellect they mean a faculty by which one may know theoretical truths, i.e., realities. Theology (the study of God), anthropology (the study of human beings), and cosmology (the study of the universe) are dealt with under this function of the intellect and are mentioned in many verses of the Qur'an. In the course of its thinking upon created things, the intellect infers God. The Qur'an, for example, states:

Indeed in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alteration of night and day, there are signs for those who possess intellect.¹¹

As to this point, ahadith reads as follows:

The depth of wisdom is worked out by the intellect. [*a-KI* 28]

The best intellectual understanding is the knowing of Truth by the truth. [*GH* 3220]

The best intellectual understanding is that man knows himself.¹²

Knowing God is practical through intellects.¹³

By intellect people have known their creator and the fact that they are created. [*a-K* 29]

⁸ Abu Sa'd Mansur ibn Husain Abi, *Nathr-u al-Durr*, researched by Muhammad ibn Ali Qarnah, Cairo: al-Hay'at-u al-Misriyyah al-'Ammah lil-Kitab 1981, p. 285.

⁹ Muhammad ibn Talha Daylami, *Irshad-u al-Qulub*, Beirut: A'alami, 1398 L.A.H.; Qom: Mu'assasaye Aal-u al-Beit, 1408 L.A.H., p. 199.

¹⁰ *al-Sihah; al-Misbah-u al-Munir; Mu'jam-u Maqa'is al-Lughah*; the root of لُق entry.

¹¹ *The Holy Qur'an*, Surah Al Imran, p. 190.

¹² Muhammad Ibn Talha Shafe'i, *Matalib-u al-Su'ol*, transcript of Ayatullah Mar'ashi Library, Qom, n.d. p. 50.

¹³ Hasan Ibn Ali Harrani, *Tuhaf-u al-Uqul*, researched by Ali Akbar Ghaffari, Qom: Islami, 1404, L.A.H., p. 62.

As for the practical intellect, Muslim scholars have suggested two main interpretations. According to the celebrated interpretation, the function of the practical intellect, like that of the theoretical one, is knowledge, however the objects of knowledge are oughts and ought-nots rather than what there is or is not.¹⁴

However, according to the less celebrated interpretation, oughts and ought-nots are absent from the theoretical intellect, like reflections on what there is or is not. The practical intellect is in fact the faculty of willing which provokes man into doing something (*IT* 352). In his other works, Avicenna has suggested another interpretation for the practical intellect. He says that the practical intellect both produces some acts peculiar to human beings such as shame, laughter, and weeping, as well as understands issues concerning the practices of man such as understanding techniques and the relative good or evil of acts.¹⁵

Some of the functions of the practical intellect, according to the celebrated interpretation, have been suggested by ahadith, including one that has been narrated from Prophet Muhammad,

After he has reached the age of puberty, that veil is removed [from his heart], then a light appears in the man's heart by which he understands the necessary and desirable duties and good and evil. Behold, the intellect in the heart is as a light in the middle of the house.¹⁶

Imam Ali asserts that

A wise and intellectual man is he who finds out the best [less evil] from among two evils.¹⁷

¹⁴ See Abu Nasr Farabi, *al-Fusul-u al-Muntaza'a*, researched by Fuzi Mistri Najjar, Beirut: Dar-u al-Mashreq, 1405 L.A.H., p. 54; [Allama] Hasan ibn Yusuf Hilli, *al-Jawhar-u al-Nadid*, Qom: Nidar, 1363 A.H., p. 233; Avicenna, *al-Isharat wa al-Tanbihat*, Tehran: Daftar Nashr Kitab, 1403 L.A.H., Vol. 2, p. 352. [Henceforth cited as *IT*]

¹⁵ Avicenna, *al-Nijat*, corrected by Muhammad Taqi Daneshpazduh, Tehran: Tehran University, 1364 A.H., p. 330; Avicenna, *al-Shifa*, interpreted by Ibrahim Madkur, Qom: Mar'ashi Najafi, 1404 L.A.H., Vol. 2, p. 37.

¹⁶ Muhammad ibn Ali Saduq, *Ilal-u al-Shara'i*, Beirut: Dar-u Ihya al-Turath, 1385 L.A.H., p. 98; Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, *Bihar-u al-Anwar*, Beirut: Dar-u Ihya al-Turath, 1403 L.A.H., Vol. 1, p. 99.

¹⁷ Muhammad ibn Talha Shafe'i, *Matalib-u al-Su'ol*, transcript of Ayatullah Mar'ashi Library, Qom, n.d.

And Imam al-Sadiq states:

By the intellect people may know good from evil. [a-K 29]

The intellect has a non-cognitive function that differs from will. Before explaining the instrumental intellect in light of Islamic traditions, it is beneficial to refer to David Hume, since he is one of the most influential thinkers in Western thought with influence concerning this matter.

Hume on Instrumental Intellect

As it is known, Hume has denied the cognitive function of intellect by saying that it cannot discover realities as they are. He also denies the moral and practical functions of intellect, i.e., good and evil oughts and ought-nots and the aims of life cannot be understood by the intellect. He introduces sense experiences instead of the theoretical role of the intellect and introduces affections and feelings, such as lust, anger, and carnal desire, instead of its practical role.¹⁸ Thus the intellect, for Hume, fails to discover realities as they are in its theoretical role, and fails to understand good and evil and the aims of life in its practical role.

Consequently, Hume recognizes the concupiscence reproached by the ahadith as the faculty for determining the aims of life and what is good or bad, thus dethroning the intellect from its position making it serve concupiscence.

One of the functions of the intellect, as mentioned in his study of the senses and functions of the intellect, is to determine the aims of life and to help distinguish between good and evil; however, in Hume's point of view, the intellect cannot determine one's aims or even what is best, rather it is the affections and feelings that do this. Man thus has no choice but to follow concupiscence and its decision is merely the immediate act of feeling pleasure or pain. Hume argues that an act, a feeling, or a character is a virtue or vice which may produce some particular pleasantness or unpleasantness (EP 346). Virtues are thus equal to pleasures producing a pleasant impression, and vices are equal to pains producing an unpleasant one. As a result, a moral feeling is a feeling for liking or disliking certain acts, manners, or characters (EP 346-7).

¹⁸ Frederik Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Volume 5: Modern Philosophy: The British Philosophers from Hobbes to Hume*, transl. Amir Jalaledin A'lam, Tehran: Scientific & Cultural Publications Company & Soroush Press 1375/1996, pp. 334-7. [Henceforth cited as EP]

Having denied the theoretical and practical functions of the intellect, and having instead introduced sense experiences and feelings, Hume assumes another role for the intellect. His well-known phrase is: the intellect is the slave of feelings and it must be so; it claims no job but to serve them and obey them (EP 343). As it were, Hume argues that the intellect merely has an instrumental function due to its being an instrument for passions and pleasures; it thus helps man taking pleasures and satisfying lusts.

Hume's account of the intellect is sometimes called instrumental and sometimes a faculty of livelihood. Needless to say, the instrumental intellect and livelihood are both embraced by ahadith, however in different interpretations.

Theoretical and Practical Intellect

Along with the theoretical and practical functions of the intellect, ahadith mentions its instrumental function as well; however the concept of the instrumental intellect in ahadith differs from that of Hume.

Generally speaking, the instrumental intellect deals with worldly livelihood; it is a faculty by which man may earn his livelihood and manage his ideal life. The instrumental intellect is sometimes substituted for the term "intellect of livelihood." Due to its ability to perform calculations and invent technology, this kind of intellect helps man predict would-be events. Some philosophers like Avicenna who classify the intellect into theoretical and practical categories subsume the instrumental function of intellect under the practical one.

In his will to Imam Ali, Prophet Muhammad said:

O Ali, it is not right for a wise man to seek anything except for three things: maintenance of livelihood, provision for the life of the hereafter, and lawful pleasure.¹⁹

On another occasion, the Prophet said,

Seven things signify the intellect of wise men: wealth shows the extent of the capacity of the intellect of the owner of the wealth.²⁰

¹⁹ Muhammad ibn Ali Saduq, *Man la Yahduruh-u al-Faqih*, researched by Ali Akbar Ghaffari, Qom: Mu'assese al-Nash al-Islami, n.d., Vol. IV, p. 356 [Henceforth cited as MY]; and a-K V87.

²⁰ Muhammad ibn Ali Karajaki, *Ma'den-u al-Jawahir*, Tehran: Al-Maktaba al-Mottadaviyah, 1394 A.H., p. 60; Warram Ibn Faras, *Tanbih-u al-Khawahir*, Beirut: Dar-u al-Ta'aruf and Dar-u Sa'b Bi ta, Vol. 2, p. 111.

There is no practicing of the intellect like management.
[MY 372]

Imam Ali states the following:

The best evidence for the richness of the intellect is good management. [GH 3151]

Of the outcomes of the intellect are the avoidance of extravagance and good management. [GH 9320]

The intellect commands you [to follow] the most useful [affairs].²¹

The [outcome of] intellect is a correct assumption and knowing the future from the past.²²

When sound, the intellect of every man demands for him to make use of every opportunity. [GH 5779]

Hume argues that man's instrumental intellect aims at lust and carnal desires. This intellect comes in rank after concupiscence to serve lust; it does not stand in line with it in order to be able to oppose it. It concerns this life rather than the life of the hereafter. On this account, the instrumental intellect comes neither after the theoretical intellect in order to know God and religion nor after the practical one to let one know of the good and evil of acts, but rather it merely guides man to positive and moral acts. On the contrary, in the religious point of view, the two theoretical and practical intellects and their products are recognized from one side, and the instrumental intellect comes in rank after the products and aims of theoretical and practical intellects in order to serve them; accordingly, it is not an instrument at the service of carnal desire opposing faith and the hereafter.

As the theoretical intellect vindicates God, faith, and the hereafter, and the practical intellect leads man to observe divine commandments, according to ahadith the instrumental intellect may help for such worldly life as complies with spirituality. This is why some ahadith have suggested a co-operation between the intellect of livelihood and that of the hereafter according to the religious point of view.

Accordingly, the ingenuity of those people who thus stand against the truth is, in some ahadith, construed as a satanic act, rather than an intellectual one (a-K 11). In other words, were the instrumental intellect to serve the

theoretical and practical intellects, thus getting in line with faith in order to manage a religious life, it is called intellect. But were it to serve concupiscence, as Hume has said, it is called a satanic act or ignorance.

Reply to Charles E. Butterworth (pp. 65-69)

I would like to thank Professor Butterworth for paying attention to my paper and I appreciate his valuable comments. Here I will address four points from his comments:

(1) *Professor Butterworth states that is not at all evident that Hume embodies the whole of Western philosophy.* I agree with his comment and also believe that Hume's ideas are not representative of the entire Western philosophy; Greek and medieval philosophers, rationalists of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and empiricists such as John Locke all projected views different from that of Hume, not to mention existentialists. However, I believe Hume to be one of the most influential philosophers in Western philosophy. He is the one who awakened Kant from slumber and, through Kant, made an impact on analytic philosophy and Modernity. In spite of his status, my focus on Hume is because I was looking for someone whose views on intellect, especially instrumental intellect, are completely in contrast to Islamic tradition and I could not find any better example.

(2) *Professor Butterworth comments that I made no attempt to explain Hume's larger goal, namely, his emphasis on limiting what is known to what can be perceived.* In this essay, my attempt was not to explain Hume's works or present an epistemology of Hume's philosophy. However, I have clearly mentioned that Hume has replaced theoretical knowledge with perceptual knowledge.

(3) *Professor Butterworth submits that Hume has received much criticism within the Western tradition and my essay did not reflect this fact.* As the focus of my essay is on instrumental intellect in Islamic tradition, I didn't find it necessary to devote a space to Western critics or proponents of Hume's works.

(4) *Professor Butterworth contends that my essay privileges Islamic tradition (Hadith) without ever showing why it ought to be privileged.* In this essay my attempt was to provide analyses on Islamic tradition with regard to instrumental intellect. To do so, I also included the opposing views of Western tradition. I never tried to privilege or make a value judgment on any one tradition, whether Western or Islamic.

Again, I feel my duty to thank Professor Butterworth for his comments.

²¹ Abu Sa'd Mansur ibn Husain Abi, *Nathr-u al-Durr*, researched by Muhammad ibn Ali Qarnah, Cairo: al-Hay'at-u al-Misriyyah al-'Amma lil-Kitab 1981, p. 285.

²² Ibn Abi al-Hadid, *'Izz-u al-Din, Sharh-u Nahj-u al-Balagha*, researched by Muhammad Abu al-Fadl Ibrahim, Beirut: Dar-u Ihya' al-Turath, 1385 A.H., 20, p. 331.