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Chapter 1: The Sleepwalkers!

If you would be a real seeker after truth, you must at least once in your life doubt, as far as possible, all things. "Discours de la Méthode"; Descartes. 1637.

Knowledge, Faith And Doubt

How certain are you about your religion and religious beliefs? Have you ever doubted any of your beliefs? Most of us claim we believe in our religion but when it comes to action, we fail, why? Why don't we act upon our faith or least we often lag behind?!

With a simple experiment you can test your faith and distinguish it from knowledge. We all know that a dead person is absolutely harmless. (Knowledge)

But why is it that we are scared to sleep in a room where our deceased grandmother lies down?!

This is the difference between mere knowledge and knowledge with faith. Mistakenly we refer to our collection of information as 'faith'.

Let's face it, we have received most of our beliefs from parents, teachers and others whom we trust without verification. Faith without knowledge is 'blind faith'. Blind faith puts a lock on the door and anesthetizes the desire to seek knowledge and truth. That is why any challenge to our blind faith poses a serious threat to our belief system and we find ourselves desperately speechless.

Is It Okay To Doubt My Faith?!

We all may have experienced days where we doubt our ability to do certain things, doubting the subject we have chosen, the career we have chosen, the school we send our children to and even doubting ourselves and what we believe. It seems there are always hooks to hang our doubts upon. That is

because doubt is a natural human mental state. Doubt, if managed wisely can ignite certainty and serenity and hence is holy. Without doubt, no human discovery and invention would have emerged!

Islam not only allows doubting our faith but it often encourages us to ponder, criticize and question what is offered to us by our surrounding society. Thus, Prophet Ibrahim (S) began his spiritual journey to Allah by first doubting the predominant doctrines of his contemporaries. He began to wonder and then doubt if stars were his deities. He then considered, though soon doubted, the Sun as a deity. In his quest for truth, he realized that they (the sun and stars) all set one after the other. He therefore denounced all the false deities and while turning to the Almighty Allah, he proclaimed:

"Verily, I have turned my face toward Him Who has created the heavens and the earth as a monotheist, and I am not one of the polytheists." (6:79)

The Almighty God in the Qur'an repeatedly blamed those who do not reflect. According to a famous narration from the Prophet Muhammad (S), 'an hour of reflection is more virtuous than 70 years of worshipping (without reflection).' Obviously, questioning and doubting are inevitable ingredients of reflection.

When I was studying at the Islamic seminary of Qom, I had a philosophy teacher who was encouraging me to study the holy Qur'an critically. His reason being 'if you don't criticize and give satisfactory answers others may pose those questions to you and then you'll be speechless.'

Therefore, I aim at doubting all our beliefs in order to distinguish the truth from the false and then to rebuild a sound belief system. I am going to doubt and question even our own existence, let alone the world around us and its Creator!

Types Of Doubt

There are different types of doubt:

Doubt As Hard Skepticism (Blind Skepticism)

As there is an unhealthy 'blind faith', there is an equally unhealthy type of 'blind skepticism'. Blind skepticism is the state of mind of people who are suspicious of any ideas that seem to criticize their lifestyle. Hard skeptics doubt and question for the sake of argument only, they are not asking to learn. Therefore, hard skepticism is destructive and doesn't solve any problem. It is not healthy to be or remain a chronic doubter.

Doubt As Earnest Questioning (Methodological Skepticism)

Skepticism is not necessarily a bad thing. It protects us against believing everything we hear.

Methodological skepticism is a scientific and sincere quest for truth. It scrutinizes all knowledge claims

with the goal of sorting out true from false.

Asking honest questions when you doubt is the only way to grow and is a very healthy method for learning. Therefore, doubt is the first step towards knowledge. It is a forceful engine behind learning.

While we try to stay away from doubt as hard skepticism, we believe doubt as earnest questioning is the path to certainty. Unless we doubt in order to examine our inherited belief system, we will not be able to determine the validity of what is true and what is not. We will begin our intellectual journey from scratch, examining the reality of the world around us and depending on its result, we will build up our belief system onwards. Let me commence the journey with the following famous story:

The Sleepwalkers

Gibran Khalil Gibran, known as Kahlil Gibran, a well-known Lebanese poet and artist of the early twentieth century, in a prose poetry named 'the sleepwalkers' says:

"In the town where I was born lived a woman and her daughter, who walked in their sleep.

One night, while silence enfolded the world, the woman and her daughter, walking, yet asleep, met in their mist-veiled garden.

And the mother spoke, and she said: "At last, at last, my enemy! You by whom my youth was destroyed -- who have built up your life upon the ruins of mine! Would I could kill you!"

And the daughter spoke, and she said: "O hateful woman, selfish and old! Who stand between my freer self and me! Who would have my life an echo of your own faded life! Would you were dead!"

At that moment a cock crew, and both women awoke. The mother said gently, "Is that you, darling?" And the daughter answered gently, "Yes, dear."!

Sleepwalking is a phenomenon of combined sleep and wakefulness. It is classified as a sleep disorder belonging to the parasomnia family. Although sleepwalkers are asleep, their eyes are open whilst walking around and they may even talk though they typically don't make sense to the observer.

The question here is how do we know that we are not sleepwalkers and that we will wake up one day perhaps upon our death?!

It is narrated from the Prophet of Islam (S):

"Mankind is asleep and only when they die, they'll wake up."2

Similarly, Rumi in the first story of his Mathnawi with reference to people's worldly activities says:

Their peace and their war (turn) on a phantasy, and their pride and their shame spring from a phantasy.3

Should we take all these literatures literally or they are metaphoric?

How can we really prove we are not sleepwalkers in our so-called life?

Most of us will say that our senses are telling us we are awake, but as I'll explain further how we can trust our sense while knowing often our senses fool us with what we refer to as 'illusions'?! So, perhaps our so-called wakefulness is yet another example of illusion!

When dreaming you are convinced that it is real. You eat, walk, talk and do whatever you would do in 'real life' assuming them all to be real. Thus, you rejoice over a happy dream and lament on a sad or scary dream. Then why not the whole life being just a dream, including your reading of this text?!

Let me explain myself with a personal experience. Some years ago, I left my hometown Isfahan to live in Sydney where I'm still living. As I had missed my parents and relatives, it happened that I would often dream of being with them. I would wake up realizing that it was all a dream. Once when I was dreaming, I said to myself I know it's a dream again. To make sure I am not dreaming, I splashed some water on my face. I washed it thoroughly and made sure this time I'm conscious and awake. "It is real this time"I said to myself.

Guess what? Yes, when all of the sudden I woke up, I realized, this was yet another dream!

As my purpose in this chapter is to make you aware of how important the question of existence is, allow me to brief you on the historical background to this question.

Ancient Sophism

Sophism4 means a spacious and fallacious argument for deceiving someone, it is a clever deceit.

As far as western philosophy is concerned, sophism is perhaps the most ancient Greek belief. Sophism was born in ancient Greece over 2400 years ago. Sophists believed that nothing exists, and if anything does exist it is inapprehensible by man and we have no access to know about it, and even if it were apprehensible it would be incommunicable and as such we can not define or describe it to others.

These roving teachers of rhetoric were seriously wounded by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle's crushing criticism. In fact, philosophy and logic were founded as a response to sophism.

Hard Skepticism

After the demise of Aristotle, Skepticism was founded by a Greek philosopher called Pyrrho. He taught that every object of human knowledge involves uncertainty. Thus, he argued that it is impossible ever to arrive at the knowledge of truth.

It is related that he acted on his own principles to such an extreme that his friends were obliged to accompany him wherever he went, so he might not be run over by carriages or fall from a cliff.

According to Hard Skepticism, things are only known to us by how they appear, and their inner substance remains unknown. The diversity of opinion among the wise, as well as the vulgar, proves this. Therefore, we ought never to make any positive statements on any subject.

Pyrrhonists suggest that we should never say "it is so", rather we should say "it seems so", or "it appears so to me".

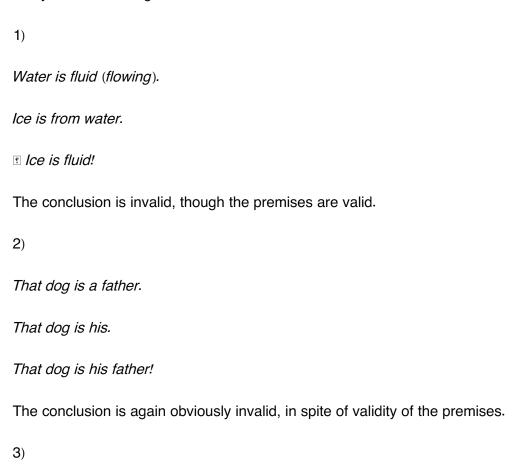
Illusion & Delusion

An Aussie says:

Both illusion and delusion are against reality, with the difference that illusion is something that is caused by outside influence, but delusion is caused by one's feelings. A mirage for example is an optical illusion, whereas schizophrenia is a delusion. All false beliefs are examples of delusions.

Examples of Illusion & Delusion

They sometimes supported their opinion by numerous examples of various optical illusions such as: mirage, looming, seeing sparkling stars around when you all of a sudden stand up from a sitting position, as well as other types of illusions of length, shape, touch, temperature, etc. on the one hand, and the numbers of false reasoning and arguments on the other. The only conclusion we can arrive at is that all so-called human opinions are delusions caused by illusions. The followings are just some examples of many false reasoning:



"All Aussies are liars!"

Is he telling the truth or is it false?

4)

All dogs are mammals.

All cats are mammals.

All dogs are cats!

I may end this chapter with the first part of the simile of the cave presented by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato.

Please read the simile carefully– and if necessary, more than once, try to imagine yourself as one of the prisoners and then see how you could assure yourself that the world you are living in is not a mere illusion. Make sure you have thought enough about the issues raised in this chapter before we solve the puzzle in the coming chapters.

The Simile Of The Cave

'I want you to go on to picture the enlightenment or ignorance of our human conditions somewhat as follows. Imagine an underground chamber, like a cave with an entrance open to the daylight and running a long way underground. In this chamber are men who have been prisoners there since they were children, their legs and necks being so fastened that they can only look straight ahead of them and cannot turn their heads. Behind them and above them a fire is burning, and between the fire and the prisoners runs a road, in front of which a curtainwall has been built, like the screen on puppet shows between the operators and their audience, above which they show the puppets'.

'I see.'

'Imagine further that there are men carrying all sorts of gear along behind the curtain-wall, including figures of men and animals made of wood and stone and other materials, and that some of these men, as is natural, are talking and some not.'

'An odd picture and an odd sort of prisoner.'

'They are drawn from life,' I replied. 'For, tell me, do you think our prisoners could see anything of themselves or their fellows except the shadows thrown by the fire on the wall of the cave opposite them?'

'How could they see anything else if they were prevented from moving their heads all their lives?'

'And would they see anything more of the objects carried along the road?'

'Of course not.'

'Then if they were able to talk to each other, would they not assume that the shadows they saw were real things?'

'Inevitably'.

'And if the wall of their prison opposite them reflected sound, don't you think that they would suppose, whenever one of the passers-by on the road spoke, that the voice belonged to the shadow passing before them?'

'They would be bound to think so.'

'And so, they would believe that the shadows of the objects we mentioned were in all respects real?'

'Yes, inevitably.'

'Then think what would naturally happen to them if they were released from their bonds and cured of their delusions. Suppose one of them were let loose, and suddenly compelled to stand up and turn his head and look and walk towards the fire, all these actions would be painful and he would be too puzzled to see properly the objects of which he used to see the shadows. So if he was told that what he used to see was mere illusion and that he was now nearer reality and seeing more correctly, because he was turned towards objects that were more real, and if on top of that he were compelled to say what each of the passing objects was when it was pointed out to him, don't you think he would be at a loss, and think that what he used to see was more real than the objects now being pointed out to him?'

'Much more real.'

'And if he were made to look directly at the light of the fire, it would hurt his eyes and he would turn back and take refuge in the things which he could see, which he would think really far clearer than the things being shown him.'

'Yes.'

'And if,' I went on, 'he were forcibly dragged up the steep and rocky ascent and not let go till he had been dragged out into the sunlight, the process would be a painful one, to which he would much object, and when he emerged into the light his eyes would be so overwhelmed by the brightness of it that he wouldn't be able to see a single one of the things he was now told were real.'

Certainly not at first,' he agreed.'

'Because he would need to grow accustomed to the light before he could see things in the world outside

the cave. First, he would find it easiest to look at shadows, next at the reflections of men and other objects in water, and later on at the objects themselves. After that he would find it easier to observe the heavenly bodies and the sky at night than by day, and to look at the light of the moon and stars, rather than at the sun and its light.'

'Of course.'

'The thing he would be able to do last would be to look directly at the sun and observe its nature without using reflections in water or any other medium, but just as it is.'

'That must come last.'

'Later on, he would come to the conclusion that it is the sun that produces the changing seasons and years and controls everything in the visible world and is in a sense responsible for everything that he and his fellow-prisoners used to see.'

'That is the conclusion which he would obviously reach.'

'And when he thought of his first home and what passed for wisdom there, and of his fellow-prisoners, don't you think he would congratulate himself on his good fortune and be sorry for them?'

'Very much so.'

'There was probably a certain amount of honour and glory to be won among the prisoners, and prizes for keen-sightedness for anyone who could remember the order of sequence among the passing shadows and so be best able to predict their future appearances. Will our released prisoner hanker after these prizes or envy this power or honour? Won't he be more likely to feel, as Homer says, that he would far rather be "a serf in the house of a landless man", or indeed anything else in the world, than live and think as they do?'

'Yes,' he replied, 'he would prefer anything to a life like theirs.'

'Then what do you think would happen,' I asked, 'if he went back to sit in his old seat in the cave? Wouldn't his eyes be blinded by the darkness, because he had come in suddenly out of the daylight?'

'Certainly.'

'And if he had to discriminate between the shadows, in competition with the other prisoners, while he was still blinded and before his eyes got used to the darkness – a process that might take some time – wouldn't he be likely to make a fool of himself? And they would say that his visit to the upper world had ruined his sight, and that the ascent was not worth even attempting. And if anyone tried to release them and lead them up, they would kill him if they could lay hands on him.'

'They certainly would.'

'Now, my dear Glaucon5,' I went on, 'this simile must be connected, throughout, with what preceded it.

- 1. Mishkat ul-Anwar, p. 544. Bihar al-Anwar; chap. 71, p. 352.
- 2. Warram, Tanbihul-Khawater, vol. 1 p. 150
- 3. Nickolson, Vol. 1, V.71
- 4. Obviously we should not mixed up 'Sophism' with 'Sufism' which is an Englized Arabic term and refers to a mystical system of the Sufis (literally those who wear woolen garments).
- 5. Plato's older brother.

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