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Chapter 3: Tools of Knowledge 1

"And among His Signs is the creation
Of the heavens and the earth, and the
Difference of your languages and colours
Verily, in that are indeed Signs for men of
Sound knowledge."
(The Holy Quran 30:22)

Now that we acknowledged our existence as well as the world around us, the next step in quest for truth is to discover different types of human knowledge as the means between us- the knower- and the known objects. What happens during the process of learning? And what are the scopes of human knowledge?

The branch of philosophy that deals with the nature, source, limits, validity of knowledge and in short deals with 'theories of knowledge' is called Epistemology. So, get ready for some epistemological massage!

Significance Of Seeking Knowledge In Islam

Undoubtedly Islam has given great importance to the process of seeking knowledge. Islam began with 'read' (The Holy Qur'an 96:1). God takes an oath by 'pen' and 'all that is used for writing' (68:1). The Almighty God in almost every page of our scripture encourages people to learn, admires the learned people and promises them elevated status in this world and the next insofar as their knowledge is associated with faith.

Islam makes it a religious duty upon Muslims to seek knowledge, and regards a seeker of knowledge to be higher in status than one who has secluded himself for worshipping God.

Therefore, studying the tools and the types of knowledge available to us is also of great significance.

Categories Of Knowledge

Depending on our approach, we can find various types of human knowledge. In this study I only mention two categories of human knowledge:

First Category: Priori V Posteriori Knowledge

A priori literally means 'from before', or 'from earlier'. For example, how do you know that a part is smaller than its total? Priori knowledge is what we referred to in the previous chapter as 'self-evident knowledge'- a kind of knowledge that is axiomatic and hence accepted by all healthy humans as 'common-sense'. This is a knowledge that we are born with and its our starting capital for learning.

Posteriori literally means 'from what comes later', or 'from what comes after'. This is a knowledge obtained through reasoning. A great portion of human knowledge falls under the category of posteriori knowledge.

One of the main differences between priori knowledge and the posteriori is that unlike the posteriori, you do not require to provide any proof or evidence for the validity of priori knowledge. Priori knowledge is an obvious fact by any sound person admitting which requires no more than attention and comprehension.

Second Category: Knowledge By Presence V Knowledge By Concept

Another category of human knowledge is in relation to utilizing tools for learning.

Knowledge by presence is the knowledge of the knower about himself/herself directly through a kind of cognition without any external means. In this kind of knowledge, the knower and the known are identical, and the object is *present* to the subject. Example of knowledge by presence is your knowledge about yourself, your feelings, your emotions, things you like or dislike and so on and so forth.

Knowledge by concept or famously known as 'acquired knowledge' is knowledge obtained from external resources. For example, your knowledge about information in this chapter is acquired knowledge. Unlike the knowledge by presence, in acquired knowledge, the knower and the known are different and there is always a means in between which links the known to the knower. Most types of human knowledge are acquired knowledge and hence it needs more explanation.

Definition Of Knowledge

Imagine a picture of a natural scene. The size of the picture is 10 X 15 cm. In the picture you see a landscape that you know is about 5 square kilometers surrounded by tall and snowy mountains. A river with an approximate width of 50 meters is crossing the middle of the view. At the shore of the river from both sides you observe tall pine trees lined up. And I can continue describing the details of the picture.

Now, if your friend asks you if the picture you have at hand consists of all the length, width, the depth and all physical characteristics of that landscape, what would you answer?

"Obviously not", you will reply with no hesitation. "They won't fit in such a small paper... what is really on the paper is some colourful spots. Yet, it is the image of the landscape."

The function of our mind is similar to a camera, or a mirror which reflects the image of an object known to us.

Although knowledge does not need any definition, it is sometimes defined as:

"The presence of the image of an object in mind." [al-Modhaffar: Al-mantiq] Therefore, knowledge is the bridge of converting an external real object – as it is – to its true reflection in mind.

Differences Between Mind And Mirror

In spite of similarities between the function of a human mind and that of a mirror, there are at least five differences which characterize the function of mind:

Reflection of meaning: Mirror can reflect solely optical images. In other words, if a man is standing against a mirror, it will show his body shape, colour and size. The mirror under no circumstances reflects his knowledge, feeling, hate or love. By contrast, the mind can reflect not only the sensible objects but the emotions and feelings too.

No correction power: If a mirror is concave it magnifies the image and shows the object bigger than its real size, and smaller if it is convex. The mirror has no power of knowing its mistakes nor to correct them. Whereas, human mind can discover its illusions and it is also able to correct them explaining why and how the illusions and delusions may occur.4

Self-reflecting: no mirror in the world can reflect its own image to itself, whereas the mind is capable of reflecting other images as well as its own. In fact, its self-reflection is by far more accurate, a phenomenon we called earlier 'knowledge by presence'.

Generalization: A mirror would only reflect the objects placed right against it. It has no power of reflecting any other objects around it. Whereas, human mind reflects the sighted objects and is also capable of generalizing them to numerous similar objects, applying the same rules equally to all of them. All scientific laws are obtained by this characteristic.

Multiplication: A mirror would only reflect the object in front of it. It cannot convert the reflected object to another mirror to reflect another object. By contrast, our mind is able to change a known object to another reflective object reflecting the reality of a third known object. This is called a 'Sign Knowledge', which will be explained later in this chapter.

Ignorance And Its Types

Before we proceed any further to discover the sources of human knowledge, let me share with you the meanings of ignorance and its two famous types.

Definition of Ignorance

Ignorance by definition is: 'lack of a knowledge for the one who is able to obtain that knowledge.'

Thus, a piece of wood or rock is not ignorant as they are not entitled to obtain knowledge, lack of which makes them ignorant. Similarly, we don't call angels 'pious' because piety is abstinence from sinning for the one who is able to sin yet voluntarily does not. The angles are infallible – meaning unable to sin.

Types of Ignorance

You may study 'ignorance' from different perspectives and as such there are different types. Ignorance in general is divided into two types:

Simple Ignorance: This means a type of ignorance where a person is aware of his ignorance.

Compound Ignorance: A compound ignorance is an ignorance that the ignorant is not aware of his ignorance, thus it is the combination of two levels of ignorance; 1. about the truth, and 2. about the fact that he does not know the truth. The example of compound ignorance is optical illusions such as mirage.

The famous saying of Socrates "Wisest is he who knows what he does not know" refers to the first type of ignorance.

Tools Of Acquiring Knowledge

1) Sense Experience

Nature is the first human source of knowledge and our five traditional external senses-sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste- as well as thermoception (temperature differences) and possibly magnetoception (direction) are the tools of accessing this source.

From the time we are born, we hear sounds around us, we see objects, we touch, taste and smell things and through each we gain some kind of knowledge accordingly.

Sense experiences are common tools of knowledge between humans and animals, with the difference being in the level of perception between the two. For instance, the sense of smell in dogs and ants is stronger than humans, as the navigation of a bat is stronger than humans. Dogs see colours in gray only, etc.

Sense perception is the first tools of obtaining knowledge to the extent that it is said in Arabic:

.مَن فقد حسّاً فَقَدَ علماً

"One who misses a sense misses the knowledge (of it)."1

Validity Of Sense Experience

There are different opinions among philosophers from the ancient times to the present about the validity of our sense perception.

Plato, for instance, did not give much credit to nature as a source of knowledge. His reason being that the relation between humankind and the nature is in partial and incomplete, and a partial knowledge cannot bring any knowledge. He claimed that 'what we know by reason alone is superior to what we are aware of through sense experience.' (*Republic 479e–484c*)

Desecrate and Kant also hold the idea that sense perception is good for daily experiences, yet they are not reliable tools for obtaining knowledge.

[This is in spite of the fact that when one of Desecrates' friend asked him about his physics books, he took him into the lower courtyard at the back of his house, and showed him a calf that he planned to dissect the next day!2]

In contrast, empiricists assert that human knowledge arises from what is provided to the mind by the senses or by introspective awareness through experience. Therefore, we have no source of knowledge for the concepts we use other than sense experience.

John Locke, the English philosopher of the 18th and 19th centuries was the first to give its systematic expression to empiricism followed by George Berkeley and David Hume.

According to empiricism, sense experience is the only tool to feed human minds with knowledge. Thus, we can only understand what we can physically perceive. Even when you imagine a mountain of gold, although such mountain doesn't exist in the external world, you could only imagine it because you have already seen a 'mountain' and 'gold'. Your mind then combines the two sense perceptions into one object calling it 'a mountain of god. The same applies to perceived phoenix etc.

Positivists, such as French mathematician and philosopher Auguste Comte of the 19th century, developed the idea of empiricists and based their philosophy on experience and empirical knowledge of natural phenomena, in which metaphysics and theology are regarded as inadequate and imperfect systems of knowledge.

During the early 20th century a group of philosophers who were concerned with developments in modern

science rejected the traditional positivist ideas that held personal experience to be the basis of true knowledge and emphasized the importance of scientific verification.

In short, the main proof of empiricists is that without sense perception we would have no knowledge about the world.

Characteristics Of Sense Perception

Individualist: The first characteristic of a sense perception is that it will be obtained individually. For instance, a child gradually knows about her mother, then father then the sibling and so on. She has no idea about the general concept of 'humankind'.

Appearance: sense perception also shares with us the appearance of the objects. For instance, your eyes can only bring knowledge about colours, shape and size of an object. It cannot show us the depth and the nature of the things.

Present: Sense perception belongs only to the present time. It cannot show us the past or the future. In other words, you cannot observe the events prior to your birth. (Note that the movie of a past event is not the event itself.)

Regional: Sense perception is also limited by place. Humans and animals can obtain sensational knowledge of the area which is within their physical sight or their hearing area. For instance, as long as the sense perception is concerned, we have no sensory knowledge about the surface of planet moon, for you have no personal sensory experience about it.

Comments On Empiricism

Although we agree that sense experience is the first and foremost elementary tool of knowledge common amongst humans and animals, we do not limit the tools of human knowledge to the senses for the following reasons:

Senses can only show us the objects, and the relation between them is known by the means of rational thinking. For instance, our eyes can see the key and the lock, but the relation between them is known by the rational law of causality. In other words, no scientific law could be possibly obtained without any rational analysis attached to its relevant sense experience.

Some empiricists such as David Hume denied the law of causality, as it cannot be explained under the theory of empiricism! He explained that the relation between the key and the lock by what he calls 'mere association' which makes us believe that the relation is permanent.

Suffices to see the fallacy of his argument that all human knowledge is based on the fact that 'if A therefore B' including Hume's hypothesis or else, he cannot suggest a certain idea either. (pay attention!)

Moreover, so many natural phenomena come in association with each other such as day and night, pen and pencil, book and library, yet we never relate them to each other as the cause and effect!

Sense experience cannot deny the impossibility of an impossible. For example, sense experience cannot deny the existence of a triangle with four angles! Simply, because the sense has no access to experience it.

Mathematics is the most certain science, yet it is not experimental. In fact, many of its concepts cannot be experienced by senses. For example, there is no circle in the real world where the distance between its perimeter to the center is exactly the same from everywhere.

2) Rational Perception

In the light of the above explanation, it is obvious that reasoning and rational analysis is our second necessary tool for obtaining knowledge. In addition to that, there are certain types of knowledge such as geometry, which is considered ideal for all sciences and philosophy, yet there are certain geometrical rules that are universally agreed on their certainty by the means of reason alone.

This fact has obliged some philosophers such as Rene Descartes and Immanuel Kant to form the doctrine of Rationalism which emphasizes the unique role of reason in obtaining knowledge, in contrast to empiricism, which emphasized on the role of sense perception.

We believe, reasoning is the higher tool of obtaining knowledge and it distinguishes the realm of humans from the kingdom of animals.

Nonetheless, we disagree that reasoning is the sole tool for obtaining knowledge. In fact, the main problem of empiricists as well as rationalists is that each one tries to generalize a tool beyond its own world. Empiricists are correct in that most of natural knowledge cannot be obtained without enjoying the sense experience. As it is impossible to explain to a born blind the difference between different colours. Thus, it amazes us to learn that Beethoven; one of the greatest musicians of all time, had lost the sense that he would have relied on the most; i.e. his sense of hearing. Notwithstanding that he was not born deaf and even so, his performance drastically dropped in his Ninth Symphony!

Therefore, there is no need for conflict between rationalism and empiricism. Both are relatively correct, each in their own areas. We can well be rationalists in mathematics for example, but empiricists in medicine.

The Holy Qur'an in numerous occasions refers mankind to physical objects including his own creation by God to discover the Creator. The followings are only a few examples:

"Do they not look at the camels, how they are created? And at the heaven, how it is raised? And at the mountains, how they are rooted and fixed firm? And the earth, how it is spread

out?"(88: 17-20)

The Holy Qur'an consists of 114 Surah (Chapter). God in 104 Surahs speaks about geology!

Monotheism and Eschatology are the most important topics in the Qur'an. The Almighty God very often refers us to nature to prove both concepts.

At the same time, the Holy Qur'an repeatedly refers us to our intellect, praises those who ponder and reflect and reproaches those who do not use their faculty of mind.

The first and the foremost Chapter in our most important book of narrations, al-Kaafi, is about the significance of intellect to the extent that 'people of no rationality are regarded as faithless people'.

On a final note, the Holy Qur'an refers to the people of Hell as those who did not utilize their sense experience or rationality to belief in God:

"Had we but listened (used our sense of hearing), or used our intelligence, we would not have been among the dwellers of the blazing Fire.!"(67:10)

3) Sign

As mentioned earlier, one of the differences between mind and mirror is that unlike a mirror our mind has the ability for 'multiplication' to produce a type of knowledge we referred to as 'Sign or Indicative Knowledge'.

For example, you attend a lecture and feel very impressed by the information and analysis provided by the lecturer. The next day during your conversation with a friend you tell him about 'the learned' scholar. If he asks, 'how would you know about his knowledge?' You will reply: 'from his presentation and analogies'. That means his presentation indicated his knowledge or was a convincing sign for his knowledge.

Dinosaurs no longer exist, and you have never seen them. Yet you trust scientists' claim that those animals used to live on our planet some million years ago, because of the 'convincing signs'.

There are so many galaxies in the universe that we can't even count them. Yet, you trust astronomers and believe in their existence, because of 'convincing signs'. Your child medical examination shows her body temperature is above its normal range (37C). A high temperature indicates she has fever. Her fever indicates she has an infection. It is 100% correct for your GP to assert your baby has an infection although he has not seen the fever. Why? Because of 'convincing signs'

The Holy Qur'an refers to this tool as 'Ayah' (Sign) and regards every single creation of God a 'Sign' indicating and glorifying its Creator. Even the tongue of an atheist whilst speaking 'against the existence of God' is glorifying its Creator!

The Holy Qur'an uses the same term 'Ayah' (Sign) for 'miracle'. That means every creature is a miracle in its unique creation indicating its Creator. Thus, not only every sentence of the Qur'an but even every Word of it is called 'Ayah' (Sign). Not only every creation but also every single cell of it is a Sign and a miracle indicating their Creator.

The contemporary Iranian Muslim philosopher; Martyr Mutahhari is perhaps the first who has discovered this as a tool for human knowledge.

According to Mutahhari and other Muslim philosophers "epistemologically there is no difference between knowing about Napoleon Bonaparte and knowing God in that we people of 21st century have not eye witnessed any of them, yet it is correct to say I believe in both of them through indicating signs."

Therefore, as we know about Napoleon by the means of some convincing historical signs affirming he was a French military leader in the earth 19th Century, similarly we know about the existence of God by the means of numerous convincing natural, rational and many other signs glorifying His existence.

In fact, a closer attention to the 'tool of Sign' indicates that most of human knowledge is obtained through this tool. Thus, to arrive at any information you must follow its signs. The entire creation is full of 'signs' that God has inscribed as numerous paths to find the Creator. It is just the matter of reading the inscription He has written for you.

Therefore, the one who is limiting his knowledge to whatever he may experience by his surgical knife has already closed his eyes to a great portion of human knowledge.

As much as 'Sign Knowledge' is very common and in most instances is regarded a convincing proof begetting 'faith', it has its disadvantages too. For example, in the above–mentioned examples, we assumed that fever is a definite symptom for 'infection', whereas we know that fever may have caused as a side effect of certain medications, or due to the use of illicit drugs and many other causes.

Also, a 'sign knowledge' is a knowledge through intermediaries which may or may not have mirrored the whole truth.

The good news is man can possibly obtain higher levels of knowledge; a knowledge without any intermediaries. Follow me in the next chapter to a very eye-opening discovery of human knowledge.

- 1. This expression will be also useful for the next chapter where we prove that those who miss purity of heart miss types of knowledge obtained by it.
- 2. Desmond M. Clarke, 'Descartes: A Biography', P.304

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