

Part 2: Reason in the View of the Quran

In the previous part we examined the Quranic language, meaning that the Quran uses two languages to deliver its message, the language of logic and the language of emotion. Each one of these has a particular addressee; reason or common-sense (*'aql*) for the first and the heart for the other. In this chapter we will look at the Quran's view towards *'aql*.

We must see whether *'aql*, or reason, in the Quranic view is what is called by the ulema of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the principles of jurisprudence (*'usul ul-fiqh*) a "binding testimony" (*hujjat*) or not. Which means this: if a perception is truly a correct perception that accords to human reason and common-sense, is man to respect it and act according to it? And if a person acts according to it and somehow makes a mistake, does Almighty God hold that person to blame, or is he excused? And, if he does not put it into practice, will he, because of having failed to act according to the clear ruling of reason, deserve to be punished?

Proofs for the Authority of Reason

The issue of the authority (*hujjiyah*) of reason and its place in Islam is certain. From the earliest days until now, amongst the ulema of Islam – apart from a tiny group – none has doubted the authority of reasoning and it has been generally counted amongst the four sources of *fiqh* (jurisprudence).

The Quran's Call to the Use of Reason

Since we are discussing the Quran, it is necessary to take our proofs for the authority of reason from the Quran itself. In various ways, and I especially emphasize that, in various ways, the Quran has endorsed the authority of reason. Only in one instance about sixty or seventy verses can be named in which it has been indicated that such and such matter has been mentioned for reason to reflect on. As an example, we will cite one of the most awe-inspiring verses of the Quran:

***"Definitely the lowest animals for God are the deaf, the dumb, those who do not reason."* (8:22)¹**

Of course, it is obvious that by deaf and dumb the Quran does not mean physically deaf and dumb, but that group of people who do not want to listen to reality, or who listen but do not admit anything with their tongues. An ear that is unable to hear reality and which is only ready to listen to futile nonsense, in the view of the Quran, is deaf. And a tongue that is only used to utter futile nonsense, in Quranic terminology, is deaf.

Those who do not reason, likewise, are those who do not profit from their thinking and reflection. The Quran considers such individuals, who do not become the name human, to be a type of animal and addresses them as "four-footers".

In another verse, while bringing up a subject related to Tawhid, or monotheism, the Quran tells us:

"And not a soul would find belief (iman) without God's permission." (10:100)[2](#)

After stating this issue which is obscure and which all minds do not have the capacity of understanding and which, to tell the truth, shocks a person, the verse continues like this:

"And He places filth on those who do not reason." (10:100)

In these two verses, which I have mentioned only for the sake of example, the Quran invites in its special way people to reason. There are also many other verses in which the authority of reason has been similarly endorsed. In other words, the Quran makes statements the acceptance of which, unless reason is accepted as an authority, is not feasible. For example, from its rivals it demands the proof of reason:

"Say, Bring your proof (of reason)." (2:111)

Here it is intended to convey the reality that reason is an authority and a *hujjat*. Similarly, in order to prove the Oneness of the *Wajib al Wujub* ("Essential Existence" i.e. God), the Quran tells us:

"And if amongst the two of them there were gods other than God, they would both definitely be in disorder." (21:22)

Here, the Quran has laid a conditional premise. It has made an exception of the major premise and has ignored the minor. With all this emphasis on *'aql*, or reasoning, the Quran wants to render null and void this claim of some religions that faith and reason are foreign to each other, that in order to become a believer one must put to sleep one's thought, and make use solely of one's heart in order to discover the Divine Light.

Making Use of the System of Cause and Effect

Another proof of the Quran's maintaining a distinction for reason is its explaining of issues by referral to the relation-of-cause and effect. The relation of cause and effect and the principle of cause are the

foundations of reasonable thought, and which are respected and used by the Quran itself. Even though the Quran speaks to us on behalf of God the Almighty, who is the Creator of the order of cause and effect, and even though it speaks to us from the beyond, to which cause and effect is inferior, still the Quran does not overlook to mention this worldly system of cause and effect and considers the world's realities and manifestations to be subject to it. As an example, take a look at this verse:

"God does not change the conditions of a people until they change their own conditions." (8:17)

Here, the Quran wants to tell us that though it is correct that fate rests with the Will of God, yet God does not impose fate on man from over and above man's choice, decisions and actions, and does not act indifferently. Fate also has a system or order, and God changes the fate of no society for no reason, and He only makes a change when they themselves make a change in what is related to them, like their ethical and social orders, and so on.

On the other hand, the Quran encourages Muslims to study the conditions of previous peoples and the events that befall them, and to take a warningful lesson. It is clear that if the events that befell the different tribes and nations and social orders were imposed indifferently and incidentally from above, there would be no meaning in studying their fates and being advised by them. By this emphasis the Quran wants to remind us that fate is subject to the rule of a single system or order. So that, if the conditions of a society are the same as the conditions of a previous society, the fate awaiting that society will be the same as that which befell the previous society. In another verse the Quran tells us:

"How many townships have we destroyed while they were (engaged) in injustice and oppression (zulm) and (how many) wells and palaces deserted?" (22:44)

Then the Quran asks why the people of all later ages do not wish to travel on the land and study and take lessons from what has happened before. In all those matters, there is a tacit, acceptance of the order of cause and effect, and to admit the relation of cause and effect is to accept the authority of reason.

[The Philosophy of the Commands](#)

The Philosophy of the Commands³

One of the other proofs for the authority of reason being the Quranic view is that it mentions a philosophy for its commands (*ahkam*). The meaning of this is that the commands which are given are the result of a best interest having to be met. The ulema of *usul ul-fiqh* (the principles of jurisprudence) say that best interests and forms of corruption are amongst the causes of the *ahkam*. For example, in one place the Quran tells us to stand up for the prayer while, in another place, it also mentions its philosophy:

"The prayer definitely prevents the obscene and the rejected." (29:25)

The Quran mentions the effect of the spirit of the prayer in terms of the human being becoming elevated and, due to this elevation, becoming averse to obscenities and evils and avoiding them. Similarly, the Quran mentions fasting and, after commanding its performance, tells us:

"The fast is written for you, as it was written for those before you, for you to be cautious of God."
(2: 183)

And it is the same way with the other commands, like zakat and jihad and so on, each of which are explained in relation to the individual and the society. In this way the Quran gives to the *ahkam*, though they are from the beyond, a worldly, earthly cause and wants the human being to reflect about them until the essence of the subject becomes clear for him, rather than thinking that they are entirely a kind of code beyond the range of human thought.

Combatting the Errors of Reason

Another thing that proves the distinction that the Quran maintains for reason, and which is more emphatic, is the Quran's struggle against the problems of reason. In order to explain this subject, we must explain another one in preparation.

In many, many instances, the human mind and thought encounters mistakes. This is a thing which is prevalent among us all. Of course, it is not only limited to reason, for desire and also cause errors.

The faculty of sight, for example, can manifest tens of faults and defects. However, in the faculty of reason, many is the time when one uses one's reason and makes a deduction, upon which one reaches a conclusion, and later one realises that the basis for the deduction was faulty. Here the question arises as to whether, due to having used one's mind wrongly in a few instances, one must put one's reason to sleep, or whether one must use a special means to find the mistakes of one's mind and thus prevent them?

In reply to this question, it was the Sophists who first said that to rely on reason is not permissible, and that to reason at all is sheer nonsense. Here the philosophers gave the Sophists many chain breaking replies, amongst which is the one that the other senses make mistakes just like reason, yet no one rules that they must be put to sleep and not used anymore. Because to lay aside reason was not possible, the great thinkers decided to block the way to mistakes. In reviewing this possibility, they became aware that every line of reasoning is formed of two parts: essence (*madi*) and. form (*surat*). It is exactly like a building in which materials like cement, brick, plaster, iron and so on have been used (essence), and which has taken the shape of a building (form). In order for the building to be well and perfectly built, it is both necessary that suitable materials be foreseen for it, and also that the plan be correct and complete.

In reasoning deductions, too, in order to ensure their correctness, it is necessary for both their essence to be correct and also their form. In order to get a correct view of the form or shape of reason and to

judge it correctly, the Aristotelian logic, or formal logic, came into being. The duty of this formal logic was to discern the correctness or incorrectness of the form or construction of reasoning, and this helps the mind to prevent itself from meeting faults in its line of reasoning.

The main point, however, is that in order to secure the correctness of a deduction, this formal logic is not enough, for it only safeguards one aspect. In order to secure the correctness of the essence of the (theorems of the) deduction, we also have a need of what we can call "essential logic" (*mantiq madi*); meaning that we need a standard by which to assess the quality of the substance of thought.

Thinkers like Bacon and Descartes strived to do the same for *essential logic* as Aristotle did for formal logic. Here too, as far as possible, standards were produced which, although being generally unequal to the logic of Aristotle, were still able to help the human to some extent and prevent him from faults in his reasoning. However, perhaps you will be amazed when you learn that the Quran has also presented points in order to prevent man from mistakes in his reasonal deductions, points which have precedence in excellence compared to the inquiries like those of Descartes, and also excellence in precedence.

The Quranic View of the Sources of Error

One of the causes that the Quran mentions for faults and errors is that probability is taken for certainty.⁴ If a person ties himself to the principle that he will follow certainty and not accept probability in the place of certainty, he will not make mistakes.⁵ The Quran greatly emphasises this matter, and, in one place, even makes it clear that one of the biggest occasions for error is this same following of probability. Or, in another place, the Quran addresses the Prophet thus:

"If you follow most people of the earth they (would) mislead you from the Path of God, for they follow (what is) only probability." (6: 116)

And in another verse, we are told:

"And do not follow what you have not knowledge of." (17:36)

Throughout the whole history of human thought, it was the Quran that was the first to make this point for man and prohibit him from this type of mistake.

The second source of error in essential reasoning, which occurs especially in social affairs, is blind imitation (*taqlid*). Many people are such that whatever their society believes, they also believe. That is, solely for the reason that something is accepted in their society or by the preceding generations, they also accept that thing.⁶

The Quran tells us that we are to measure each issue with the standard of reason, and neither accept whatever our grandfathers did as a binding authority nor reject their examples entirely. People have accepted many things from the past which were mistakes in their own time, while there are many things

that were introduced ages ago and which are right and correct, but which, because of ignorance, people have not accepted. In accepting or rejecting these things we must seek the help of reason and reflection, not blindly adhere to imitation, to blind *taqlid*. The Quran has predominately compared the following of fathers and grandfathers to reason and thought:

"And when it is said to them 'follow what God has sent down', they say 'on the contrary, we follow that which we found our fathers upon.' Even if their fathers reasoned not a thing, nor were truly guided?" (2: 170)

The Quran emphasizes that the age of an idea is neither a proof of its being out of date and incorrect, nor of its being correct and valid. There is a way for material things to become out of date, but the realities of existence, no matter to what extent they witness the passing of time, never become ancient and dated. A reality like "Definitely God does not change the conditions of a people until they change their own conditions" for as long as the world is still the world, is firmly fixed, established, relevant and true.

The Quran says that we must meet problems with the force of reason and thought. A correct idea or belief must not be rejected simply on the grounds that others do not give it their stamp of approval, and nor must a belief or idea be accepted simply because it pertains to some important and famous personality. In every area, the individual must engage himself in investigation and a thorough review of the issues that face him.⁷

Another influential factor in causing mistakes, and which the Quran mentions, is the following of inflated egos and desires, and having self-centered motivations.

Whatever the individual thinks about, until he gives himself neutrality and freedom from the evils of self-interest and motivation, he cannot think correctly. That is, reason or common-sense can only work correctly in the environment in which there is no selfishness in action. Let me cite you a well-known story about Allamah Hilli which supports this fact:

Allamah Hilli was once asked the following problem in *fiqh* (jurisprudence) – if an animal dies in a well and this results in the unclean (*najas*) dead body remaining in the well, what must be done with the water of the well?⁸

As it happened, an animal had fallen into the well of Allamah Hilli's house at that moment and he was obliged to deduce this law for himself too. There were two possible ways the law could be deduced. The first was that the well had to be blocked up and never used again, and the other was that a certain amount of water had to be taken out of the well for the rest of the water, having mixed with the fresh water that would naturally come to replace it, to be used with no problem. Allamah Hilli was aware that he could not give a completely impartial verdict on this issue, for his own interests were involved. First he gave the instruction that his own well was to be blocked up, and then, with an easy spirit and released from the pressure and whisperings of his "self", he deduced his verdict. The Quran mentions

allegiance to selfish desires many times, but we will satisfy ourselves with one instance. The Quran tells us:

"So they follow only probability and what their 'selves' greedily desire." (53:23)

1. "Animals" in this verse is the translation of the Arabic word dawab which includes insects, but its usage is limited to servile, four-footed animals like the horse, donkey, cow and mule.

2. To prevent any misunderstandings, perhaps it is necessary to note that this verse is one that denotes a quality of God; the quality of His giving to man the permission to make the choice of whether to believe or not. Religion totally belongs to God, and no one can intrude into this affair of His without His permission. However, the style of the verse tells us that this permission is not granted to those who do not reason. The filth referred to is the opposite of faith (iman), like doubt and misguidance. See also Quran 6:125. Translator's note.

3. Commands (ahkam) are the feature of Islam which make up the Islamic legislation (shari'ah) and which are generally described as the commands which regulate the Muslim's actions in his life and which give order (nazm) to his life.

Translator's note.

4. This is exactly the same as the first of Descartes' rules, which says that he accepts nothing without making a thorough review and that if a probability is faced with an opposing probability, he will not accept that probability. And this is the correct meaning of certainty.

5. Of course, it must be realised that where certainty cannot be acquired, probability and likelihood must be taken into consideration. Not as being certainty, however, but as being just what they are, probability and likelihood. To take them as being certainty results in mistakes.

6. This subject is also contained in one of Bacon's works, and where he mentions what in his view is an idol, which he calls the idol of society or the idol of the populace, his meaning is this same blind following and blind imitation.

7. The issue of imitating one's forefathers, the leading figures of society, the fashion of the times or the tendency of society, must not be confused with the imitation (taqlid) of the most learned and just mujtahid, which is discussed in fiqh (jurisprudence), and which is obligatory. The taqlid of fiqh is based on the benefitting from the specialised knowledge of a very special man, and relates solely to actions, not to thoughts and beliefs.

8. Perhaps it is necessary to explain that cleanliness of water is a very important issue in Islam, while dead bodies of animals are dirty and impure (najas), and pollute all they come into wet contact with. In this case, therefore, the cleanliness and usefulness of the well was in question. Translator's note

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