

CONCEPT OF EPISTEMOLOGY AS PER QUR'AN

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Abstract: Man is vicegerent of God (*Khalifa*). In order to enable him to fulfill his responsibilities, Almighty Allah endowed man with potentials of knowledge. It becomes incumbent upon him to mould this knowledge as per the Islamic framework. Therefore, all types of knowledge whether it is natural science, social science, or even pure science should aim at establishing an Islamic system. Islam is essentially a religion of knowledge, knowledge as per Islam, is the central means to salvation of soul and to the attainment of human happiness in this life as well as in life hereafter. Moreover, Divine Unity (*Tawhid*) and Equilibrium (*Itidal*) are the main principles of Islam and it upholds the idea of hierarchy and unity of knowledge and of modes of knowing. All possible avenues to knowledge are duly recognized and each accorded a legitimate place and function within the total scheme of Islam. The Muslims have a firm belief that *Allah* alone is absolute and everything else is relative. This belief is found on the Islamic principle of *Tawhid*. As the Absolute Truth, *Allah* is the source of all other truths which, however, admit of a hierarchy or degrees of relativity and these levels of relative truths are known to man through a number of ways. As per Islam, man is bestowed by all the necessary faculties of knowing which enable him to know all that he needs to know.

In contemporary world many epistemological theories has come to fore like rationalist theory which believes in that type of knowledge being ultimate that is based on reason alone and empiricist theory which believes on that type of knowledge being ultimate that is based on experience and in present paper an attempt has been made to prove that it is only the Islamic epistemology that is more profound, comprehensive and perfect than most of the present world theories of knowledge.

Index terms – Epistemology, knowledge, world, Islam.

Introduction

The term epistemology is derived from the Greek term 'Episteme' which means knowledge and 'Logy' which means the study of and thus epistemology means the study of the roots and paths of knowledge. Epistemology is one of the core areas of philosophy. It is concerned with nature, sources and limits of knowledge. Knowledge has four types as per Islam; the first type of knowledge is innate in human beings right from their birth. Second type is gained through sense-experience and is called sensory knowledge like observation and experimentation. Third type is gained by intellect or reason like the laws of Mathematics, Ethics, Fiqh and the forth type of knowledge is spiritual knowledge and is gained through reflection and contemplation.

In Holy *Qur'an* there are about 750 verses which indicate about the term '*Ilmi*' and urge us to study and contemplate on the universe so that we may be able to find out the truth. The subject of knowledge is man himself and is having the various faculties of knowledge like his five senses and reason. He can use his senses and reason in the way of acquiring knowledge, but these faculties are having some limitations and they can operate within assigned limits for example senses can help us in gaining knowledge of those objects which are having physical appearance but there is another world which is immaterial, abstract and transcendent which can't be comprehended through senses or reason alone. The Muslims never regard the physical reality to be as the whole but only an aspect of the whole realityⁱⁱ. *Qur'an* bear witness to the fact that there is one more world of metaphysics or abstracts beyond this world which can't be comprehended by man through his senses or

reason alone. This world is regarded as the lowest of the many levels of reality the highest being *Allah*. Thus a searcher of true /real knowledge has to be very much careful of all these dangers. No doubt *Qur'an* gives us a number of references for the use of reason ('*Aql*) and wisdom (*Hikmah*) in the path of acquiring true knowledge but they work within the assigned limits. Thus Islam is having its own methodology of arriving at the true knowledge where *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* are the basis of knowledge and as its main sources. The very first verse that was sent down to the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in about 611 A.D, in the cave of *Hira*, it says:

Proclaim! [or read!] in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created-man, out of a [mere] clot of congealed blood. Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful, He Who taught [the use of] the pen, Taught man that Which he knew notⁱⁱⁱ .

Quranic Epistemology: A comprehensive knowing

The two main sources of Islamic knowledge are both the Holy *Qur'an* and Traditions (*Ahadith*) of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). It is important to note that *Allah* made *Adam* superior to the angels through the factor of knowledge as it is stated in the Holy *Qur'an* that *Allah* taught *Adam* all the names and asked him to inform angels about the names which they otherwise did not know. Then *Allah* made all the angels to prostrate before *Adam*. Here we see that it was nothing other than the factor of knowledge which made human beings superior even to the angels who keep on prostrating and worshipping *Allah* all the time^{iv}.

The *Qur'an* urges man, in order to understand the true knowledge, to observe the phenomena of nature, such as succession of day and night, the movement of heavenly bodies and to think upon the mysteries of creation. As *Qur'an* says,

Allah is He who raised the heavens without any pillars that ye can see; is firmly established on the throne (of authority). He has subjected the sun and the moon (To His law). Each one runs (its course) for a term appointed^v .

One of the most important aspects of Qura'nic epistemology is that it lays great stress on *Fikr* (*reflection*) and

Dhikr (contemplation) being one of the ways of acquiring true knowledge. The *Qur'an* urges man, in order to understand the true knowledge, to observe the phenomena of nature, such as succession of day and night, the movement of heavenly bodies and to think upon the mysteries of creation. Reflection, thinking and pondering over the mysteries of creation according to *Qur'an*, should lead one to the recognition and appreciation of Divine Creator. Thus a man according to the Islam is not the product of a blind process of evolution but is created by *Allah* with a definite purpose and for the fulfillment of that purpose is endowed by

Allah with the qualities of self-consciousness, freedom and reason so that he may be able to attain the Divine knowledge . *Qur'an* gives a number of terms which exerts to think and ponder over this universe and thus may be able to find the truth. *Fikr* is one of these terms and its meaning is thinking and understanding. *Tafakur* is derived from the word *Fikr* and means to examine something to obtain the clear knowledge. Since *Fikr* involves mind for thinking, thus it is closely related with '*Aql* which is always mentioned in *Qur'an* in a positive meaning. '*Aql* means reason, rationality, understanding, intelligence etc. There is one more term which is used by *Qur'an* repeatedly for the purpose of reflection and observation and that is *Tadabbur*, which literally means to take care of a matter i.e. of any event, affair or case and see its consequences. Thus *Tadabbur* keeps watch on where the matter is finally leading to and what are its results. In this way *Taffakur* is closely related with the term *Tadabbur*. the term *Taffakur* encourages a deeper reflection and consideration of the universal phenomenon through which a man can reach to final conclusion and recognize *Allah* as the soul and final source of all knowledge. Furthermore this *Fikr* leads to *Dhikr* i.e. the practical aspect of knowledge i.e. *Ibadah* (prayer) of *Allah* through His remembrance and all these endeavors leads towards '*Ilm* i.e. the True knowledge when we go near to *Allah* through *Dhikr*. But *Taffakur* is necessarily completed by *Tadabbur* in order to reach to a *Tawhidic* knowledge which is in complete consonance with the '*Ilm* (Knowledge) Islam stands for. The Quranic epistemology primarily holds the principle of *Tawhid* i.e. *Allah* is one and is the principle cause and source of knowledge. *Qur'an* however does not negate the existence of other sources of knowledge, such as our senses or intellect. It does however; affirm that even if our senses are used to obtain knowledge, it is impossible to do so

without the source of our senses *Allah* and that this fact should be acknowledged i.e. knowledge cannot be achieved solely through the human effort^{vi} .

Types of Knowledge as per *Qur'an*

There are references in *Qur'an* concerning two realms of knowledge, one seen and the other unseen realm of knowledge. The former can be understood by human beings through the various faculties of knowing bestowed upon them by *Allah* which include his sensory and intellectual (reason) faculties. The unseen world can also be known in a different way through the province of revelation^{vii} .

Depending upon these two realms thus, there are two types of knowledge one is intrinsic or revealed knowledge and the other is extrinsic or acquired knowledge. The *Qur'an* describes humans as having five distinctive parts namely, soul (*Ruh*), mind (*'Aql*), heart (*Qalb*), body (*Jism*) and self (*Nafs*), from which knowing may arise. Each part, however, functions differently in its potential to enable knowing. Concerning intrinsic knowledge, humans have the capacity to know in an intrinsic manner, in which knowing is indicative of the human conditions, such as in our soul or self. Intrinsic knowing involves innate knowing and is inherent in every human being. It indicates that human beings are imbued with an intrinsic ability to grasp knowledge and the *Qur'an* attests to this reality by declaring,

And on the earth are the signs for those who have faith with certainty. And also in your own selves, will you not then see^{viii} .

Intrinsic knowing is a consequence of the human condition, an insight that *Allah* shared with humanity by the way of *Qur'an*^{ix} . Regarding extrinsic knowledge the *Qur'an* establishes that *Allah* has given humans the capacity to potentially know through their own efforts, relying on sensory or mental faculties, including the heart, mind and body. The *Qur'an* verifies this when it states,

And Allah has brought you forth from your mother's womb knowing nothing-but He has endowed you with hearing, and sight and hearts, so that you might have cause to be grateful^x .

Muslims are repeatedly reminded by the *Qur'an* that they should use all the faculties of knowing in a legitimate way in order to reach to the true knowledge. The legitimate use of each faculty demands that its proper domain competence and its limitation be duly recognized^{xi} .

Western Concept of epistemology

So far as the western epistemology is concerned especially the modern epistemology it revolves round the two type of knowledge namely rationalism and empiricism. Western rationalists hold that at least some of our knowledge is derived from the faculty of reason alone. On the contrary, empiricists hold that all of our knowledge is ultimately derived from our senses or sense-experience. Therefore, they deny the existence of innate ideas or knowledge or the knowledge that we possess from birth. Empiricism fits well with the scientific world-view that places an emphasis on experimentation or observation and struggles to account for certain types of knowledge like knowledge of pure mathematics or ethics. Moreover the western empiricists believe that there cannot be any sort of knowledge of supersensible or Ultimate Reality and knowing is confined to the empirical or sensible reality. The above definition leads to the fact that the Islamic concept of knowledge is quite different from the western empirical concept of knowledge as it has always been inherent in the thinking of Muslim scholars to believe that the revealed word of God (*Wahy*) is the main source of knowledge. All other knowledge derived through scientific experimentation, observation or reflection is meant to support or substantiate the instructions given in the *Qur'an*.

Conclusion

Therefore a Quranic epistemology begins with the affirmation of the certainty of knowing through the methodology offered by it considering *Allah* as the primary source of all knowledge as well as the tools used to derive the knowledge i.e. the revelation (*Qur'an* and *Sunnah*) and reason, including ones sensory and mental faculties. But it cautions people in regard to the limitations of all sensory and mental knowledge by reminding them that acquiring true knowledge is not possible without God's sanction. In addition, it describes two kinds of knowing: intrinsic (innately connected to the human condition) and extrinsic (acquired by the way of sensory or mental faculties). In spite of all these facts one thing becomes quit clear that acquiring knowledge is impossible, in either form of knowing, without God's approval. In essence, this epistemology combines a comprehension of revelation and creation in its search for true knowledge.

Notes and References

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