

## Knowledge: An Islamic Perspective

In this editorial I will highlight three aspects of knowledge from an Islamic perspective: the nature of knowledge, sources of knowledge, and limitations of human knowledge.

Knowledge occupies an exalted position in Islam. Those who know occupy a higher position than those who do not know.

Allah will exalt those who believe among you, and those who have knowledge, to high ranks. Allah is Informed of what ye do.<sup>1</sup>

There are three grades of knowledge, depending on accuracy and validity. The truth behind reality is called *ḥaqq al-yaqīn*.

Lo! This is certain truth.<sup>2</sup>

Knowledge that is empirical but is of lesser degree because it is based on observation by human senses that are not perfect is called *'ilm al-yaqīn*.

Nay, would that ye knew (now) with a sure knowledge!<sup>3</sup>

Knowledge that is empirical but is of lesser degree because it is based on observation by human senses that are not perfect is called *'ayn al-yaqīn*.

Aye, ye will behold it with sure vision.<sup>4</sup>

The Qur'an puts great emphasis on evidence-based knowledge and always challenges those who make claims or allegations to produce their evidence.

Say: Bring your proof (of what ye state) if ye are truthful.<sup>5</sup>

The story of Ibrahim صلى الله عليه وسلم illustrates the significance of evidence-based empirical knowledge. The Qur'an says:

And when Ibrahim said (unto his Lord): My Lord! Show me how Thou givest life to the dead, He said: Dost thou not believe? Ibrahim said: Yea, but (I ask) in order that my heart may be at ease. (His Lord) said: Take four of the birds and cause them to incline unto thee, then place a part of them on each hill, then call them, they will come to thee in haste, and know that Allah is mighty, wise.<sup>6</sup>

Ibrahim صلى الله عليه وسلم knew and believed from revealed knowledge that Allah resurrected the dead. He, however, asked Allah to show him how the dead were resurrected, not out of weak faith but because as a human he could understand and internalize knowledge that comes from empirical observation. Allah ordered him to carry out an experiment and to observe the phenomenon of resurrection for himself. Thus, empirical knowledge extended and reaffirmed revealed knowledge.

Human knowledge is potentially wide and is continuously expanding. The limit of human knowledge is ordained by Allah جل جلاله. Allah's knowledge is unlimited. The Qur'an says:

And if all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea, with seven more seas to help it, (were ink), the words of Allah could not be exhausted. Lo! Allah is Mighty, Wise.<sup>7</sup>

An individual or community can only know a small amount of the knowledge and must have the humility to know and acknowledge that there is a lot that is not known. There is a difference in knowledge (quantity and quality) among humans as individuals and as communities. Some humans know more than others. Many do not know.

For he was, by our instruction, full of knowl-

---

Correspondence should be directed to

Omar Hasan Kasule, Sr., MBChB, MPH, DrPh  
omarkasule@yahoo.com

---

edge (and experience): but most men know not.<sup>8</sup>

The Qur'an describes some individuals as possessing very deep knowledge.

But those of them who are firm in knowledge and the believers believe in that which is revealed unto thee, and that which was revealed before thee.<sup>9</sup>

It is a cardinal principle of Islam that all knowledge is ultimately from Allah ﷻ, and He taught Adam the names of all things.

They said: Be glorified! We have no knowledge save that which Thou hast taught us. Lo! Thou, only Thou, art the Knower, the Wise.<sup>10</sup>

Humans can acquire knowledge passively from revelations or actively by empirical observation and experimentation. Revelation (*wahy*), inference (*'aql*), and empirical observation of the universe, are major sources of acquired knowledge. Humans throughout history have quenched their thirst for knowledge from all the three sources. In terms of quantity, empirical knowledge (*al-'ilm al-tajribi*) comes first. In terms of quality, revealed knowledge (*al-wahy*) comes first. There is close interaction and interdependence between revelation, inference, and empirical observation. *'Aql* is needed to understand *wahy* and reach conclusions from empirical observations. *Wahy* protects *'aql* from mistakes and provides it with information about the unseen. *'Aql* cannot, unaided, fully understand the empirical world.

Revelation is true, relevant, and essential knowledge. In addition to giving facts, it also provides a methodology that can be used by other sources of knowledge. Most empirical knowledge is from observation and experimentation. Revelation provides general principles that guide and regulate empirical observations. Knowledge by revelation reaches humans only through prophets and messengers.

Allah verily hath shown grace to the believers by sending unto them a messenger of their own who reciteth unto them His revelations, and causeth them to grow, and teacheth them the Scripture and wisdom;

although before (he came to them) they were in flagrant error.<sup>11</sup>

Ordinary humans cannot receive revealed knowledge on their own. Knowledge of the past and the future is best obtained from revelation because empirical observation is limited in the time dimension. Humans can extrapolate from existing knowledge to predict the future but can never be sure. Archeology, for example, is an empirical observation of the past but is limited because with time, artifacts become changed and distorted. Even if not distorted, they may not be interpreted correctly. The new discipline of futuristic studies relies on extrapolation from present-day trends. Its results cannot be conclusive.

The universe or cosmos around humans (*al-kun*) is a source of knowledge. Allah gave humans senses to enable them to get empirical knowledge from their environment.

And Allah brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers knowing nothing and gave you hearing and sight and hearts that haply ye might give thanks.<sup>12</sup>

The concept of causality, *sababiyyat*, underlies most knowledge obtained by empirical observation. This concept asserts that there is a material cause for every physical event that a human observes. He may be or not be aware of the cause but cannot deny its existence.

Intellect (*al-'aql*) distinguishes humans from other living things. It enables them to understand and correctly interpret the sensory perceptions of the signs of Allah in the universe and thus leads to stronger faith. Intellect is so important that the Qur'an severely condemns its misuse or under use.

Already have We urged unto hell many of the jinn and humankind, having hearts wherewith they understand not, and having eyes wherewith they see not, and having ears wherewith they hear not. These are as the cattle - nay, but they are worse! These are the neglectful.<sup>13</sup>

Intellect can be a primary source of knowledge in a few instances such as mathematical knowledge. In

---

most cases the intellect is not in itself a primary source of knowledge. It is a tool that enables humans to generate deeper knowledge and understanding from the primary sources: revelation and empirical observation. Al-'aql can be looked at as a series of intellectual processes with which Allah ﷻ has endowed the human.

The Qur'an has used several terms to describe intellectual processes. Thinking (*tafakkur*) is the most popular. It is noteworthy that the Qur'an links thinking to a form of empirical observation using the human senses. Thinking can be by visual observation of the cosmos.

Have they not considered the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and what things Allah hath created, and that it may be that their own term draweth nigh? In what fact after this will they believe?<sup>14</sup>

Humans are enjoined to think about the Qur'an.

Will they not then ponder on the Qur'an? If it had been from other than Allah they would have found therein much incongruity.<sup>15</sup>

They are also enjoined to ponder about the creation, and signs of Allah ﷻ in the universe.<sup>16-17</sup>

Lo! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of night and day, and the ships which run upon the sea with that which is of use to men, and the water which Allah sendeth down from the sky, thereby reviving the earth after its death, and dispersing all kinds of beasts therein, and (in) the ordinance of the winds, and the clouds obedient between heaven and earth: are signs (of Allah's sovereignty) for people who have sense.<sup>16</sup>

Lo! In the creation of the heavens and the earth and (in) the difference of night and day are tokens (of His Sovereignty) for men of understanding.<sup>17</sup>

The thinking process can be extended backward in time by thinking about history and the lessons garnered from it.

Do but travel in the land and see the nature of the consequence for those who did deny (the messengers).<sup>18</sup>

Innate knowledge is inborn. Acquired knowledge is obtained postnatally. Knowledge of good and bad is innate in humans, but they can be confused and may need acquired knowledge to guide them in the gray areas. Acquired knowledge can be from revelation or from empirical observation. These two sources of knowledge reinforce the innate knowledge as well as reinforce each other. A good example is the prohibition of usury. A human should innately know that usury is an injustice for the poor who have no alternative to getting loans at prohibitive interest rates. On the other hand, the loan givers gain interest income without any effort. Both the lenders and borrowers may not consciously be aware of the injustice of usury because of overwhelming practical considerations of the moment. The role of revealed knowledge is to point out the injustice of usury, reinforcing the innate knowledge. Empirical observation of the inherent injustice between lenders and borrowers – whether as individuals, companies, or countries – again reinforces the appreciation of the sense of injustice in usurious transactions.

Knowledge can be classified as knowledge of the seen (*'ilm al-shahādah*), and knowledge of the unseen (*'ilm al-ghaib*). Humans know only what they can see; they do not know the unseen.

Say (O Muhammad): None in the heavens and the earth knoweth the Unseen save Allah; and they know not when they will be raised (again).<sup>19</sup>

The unseen can be absolute (*ghaib muṭlaq*), or relative (*ghaib nisbī*). Humans cannot in any way know *ghaib muṭlaq* except through revelation. *Ghaib nisbī* is something that is knowable as a result of humans taking certain measures. For example, the contents of a closed box are unseen by a human, but when the box is opened, the contents become known. It is, however, *shirk* (claiming to share an attribute of God) for a human to claim with certainty and affirmatively to know the contents of a closed box if he has no evidence through the senses. The Qur'an has given examples of *ghaib muṭlaq* as knowledge of the soul (*rūḥ*).

---

They are asking thee concerning the Spirit. Say: The Spirit is by command of my Lord, and of knowledge ye have been vouchsafed but little.<sup>20</sup>

Also unknown to humans is the knowledge of the last day<sup>21</sup> and knowledge of the time of death.<sup>22</sup>

They ask thee of the (destined) Hour, when will it come to port. Say: Knowledge thereof is with my Lord only. He alone will manifest it at its proper time... .<sup>21</sup>

No soul knoweth what it will earn tomorrow, and no soul knoweth in what land it will die. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware.<sup>22</sup>

Any knowledge related to empirical observation can be *ghaib nisbī*. The relative, *ghaib nisbī*, can be known by some people in favorable time and space circumstances and not by others. It can be known if special and appropriate instrumentation is used. The whole purpose of scientific research is to roll back the field of *ghaib nisbī*. *Ghaib nisbī* can be contemporaneous i.e. things that exist at the moment but that are unknown, past or historical events, or future events.

The Qur'an in many verses has reminded humans that their knowledge in all spheres and disciplines of knowledge is limited.

Lo! ye are those who argue about that whereof ye have some knowledge: Why then argue ye concerning that whereof ye have no knowledge? Allah knoweth. Ye know not.<sup>23</sup>

Allah ﷻ allows humans to know some things and not others. Humans do not normally reach the full capacity of knowledge because of other limitations. One of these limitations is failure to exert themselves to the maximum in the search for knowledge.

Human senses can be easily deceived. Human vision is limited. Hearing, smelling, tasting are relatively insensitive in humans while some animals have more acute senses. Human intellect has limitations in interpreting correct sensory perceptions. There are basic limitations in the neurochemical functions in the brain. Humans also have a limited database of prior knowledge to be able to interpret all new knowledge correctly.

**Omar Hasan Kasule, Sr., MBChB (MUK), MPH, DrPh (Harvard)**  
**Professor, King Fahad Medical College**  
**Riyadh, Saudi Arabia**

### References

1. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 58, Verse 11.
2. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 56, Verse 95.
3. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 102, Verse 5.
4. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 102, Verse 7.
5. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 2, Verse 111.
6. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 2, Verse 260.
7. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 31, Verse 27.
8. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 12, Verse 68.
9. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 4, Verse 162.
10. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 2, Verses 31-2.
11. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 3, Verses 164.
12. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 16, Verse 78.
13. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 7, Verse 179.
14. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 7, Verse 185.
15. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 4, Verse 82.
16. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 2, Verse 164.
17. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 3, Verses 190-1.
18. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 3, Verse 137.
19. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 27, Verse 65.
20. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 17, Verse 85.
21. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 7, Verse 187.
22. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 31, Verse 34.
23. The Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 3, Verse 66.