

Intellect and Intuition: Their Relationship from the Islamic Perspective

by

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In a world in which the intellect has become synonymous with reason and intuition with a “biological” sixth sense concerned with foretelling future events, it becomes difficult to understand what intellect and intuition, these two key faculties upon which knowledge is based, can mean in the context of Islamic thought. To understand the meaning of these terms in the traditional Islamic universe where the light of the One dominates all multiplicity and multiplicity is always seen in the light of Unity, it is necessary to examine the actual terminology employed in Islamic languages, particularly Arabic and Persian, to denote the concepts of intellect and intuition.

In modern western languages the fundamental distinction between intellect and reason is usually forgotten and the term intellect is used as the equivalent of reason. In Arabic and other Islamic languages a single term, *al-'aql*, is used to denote both reason and intellect, but the distinction between the two as well as their inter-relation and the dependence of reason upon the intellect is always kept in mind. *Al-'aql* in Arabic is related to the root *'ql* which means basically to bind. It is that faculty which binds man to God, to his Origin. By virtue of being endowed with *al-'aql*, man becomes man and shares in the attribute of knowledge, *al-'ilm*, which ultimately belongs to God alone. The possession of *al-'aql* is of such a positive nature that the Holy Quran refers over and over again to the central role of *al-'aql* and of intellection (*ta'aqqul* or *tafaqquh*) in man's religious life and in his salvation.¹ But *al-'aql* is also used as reason, intelligence, keenness of perception, foresight, common sense and many other concepts of a related order. Moreover, each school of Islamic thought has elaborated in great detail certain aspects of the the meaning of intellect as it pertains to its perspective and inner structure.

¹ See for example, “They also say: If we had only heard, and had understood (*na'qilu*) we would not have been of the inhabitants of the Blaze.” Surah *The Kingdom* (63), v.10 (Arberry translation). In this verse the refusal to understand or literally “intellect” is equated with the loss of paradise.

In many other verses various forms of the verb *faqaha* are used with the same meaning as *'aqala*, for example,

“We have distinguished the signs for a people who understand (*yafqahūn*).” Surah *The Cattle* (6), v. 98.

As far as the word intuition is concerned, such terms as *hads* and *firāsah* have been usually used. These terms imply a “participation” in a knowledge which is not simply rational but not opposed to the intellectual as the term is understood in its traditional sense. Another set of terms more prevalent in texts of philosophy, theology, and Sufism are *dhawq*, *ishrāq*, *mukāshafah*, *basīrah*, *nazar* and *badīhah*. These terms are all related to the direct vision and participation in the knowledge of the truth in contrast to indirect knowledge upon which all ratiocination is based. This contrast is emphasized also in the usage of the term *al-‘ilm al-hudūrī* or “presential knowledge” as opposed to *al-ilm al-husūlī*, or “attained knowledge”,² but these terms refer to the difference between intuition as a form of a knowledge based upon immediate experience and ratiocination as indirect knowledge based upon mental concepts. In no way, however, do all these terms, as used in traditional Islamic languages stand opposed to *al-‘aql*; rather, they serve as its complement in its profoundest sense. Islam has never seen dichotomy between intellect and intuition but has created a hierarchy of knowledge and methods of attaining knowledge according to which degrees of both intellection and intuition become harmonized in an order encompassing all the means available to man to know, from sensual knowledge to the “knowledge of the heart”.

To understand fully the relationship between intellect and intuition in Islam, it is necessary to turn to those Islamic intellectual perspectives which have brought to actualization various possibilities inherent in the Islamic revelation. They include, as far as the present discussion is concerned, the purely religious sciences such as Quranic and Sharī‘ite studies, theology, various schools of philosophy and finally Sufism.

In the religious sciences the function of the intellect is seen only in light of its ability to elucidate the verities of revelation. It is revelation which is the basic means for the attainment of the truth, and it is also revelation which illuminates the intellect and enables it to function properly. This wedding between revelation and the intellect makes it in fact possible for the mind to “participate” in the truth by means of that “act” or “leap” which is usually called intuition and which is inseparable from the faith which makes knowledge of the truth possible.

Some of the more esoteric commentators of the Holy Quran have emphasized the complementary nature of revelation and intellect which in fact has been called particular or partial revelation (*al-wahy al-juz’ī*), while objective revelation which causes a new religion to become established is called universal revelation (*al-wahy al-kullī*). Only through the objective and universal revelation do the virtualities of the intellect become actualized. It is only by submitting itself to objective revelation that this subjective revelation in man, which is the intellect, becomes fully itself, capable not only of analysis but also synthesis and unification. In its unifying function the intellect is salutary and is able to save the soul from all bondage of

² Concerning *al-‘ilm al-hudūrī* and *al-‘ilm al-husūlī* see S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Science — An Illustrated Study*, London, 1976, p.14.

multiplicity and separateness. The instrument of revelation, the Archangel Gabriel, is also the Holy Spirit which illuminates the intellect and enables it to possess the faculty of intuition. In the light of revelation, the intellect functions not merely as reason but as intellectual intuition which, wed to faith, enables man to penetrate into the meaning of religion and more particularly God's word as contained in the Holy Quran. Man must exercise his intelligence in order to understand God's revelation, but in order to understand God's revelation the intellect must be already illuminated by the light of faith³ and touched by the grace issuing from revelation.

As far as Islamic theology or *Kalām* is concerned, it is engaged more in the understanding of the will of God than reaching the universal dimensions of the intellect. This is especially true of the dominant school of Sunni theology founded by Abu'l-Hasan al-Ash'arī. The Ash'arite school is based on a voluntarism which reduces the function of the intellect to the purely human level and remains nearly oblivious to the aspect of the Divinity as objective Truth and Knowledge.⁴ For this school, truth is what God has willed and the intellect has no function outside the external tenets of the religion. Although the extreme form of voluntarism found in the earlier school of Ash'arism was somewhat modified by the later school (*al-muta'akhhirūn*) of such men as al-Ghazzālī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Ash'arism has remained throughout its history as a school of theology in which the intellect is made subservient to the will of God and not considered in its function of returning man to the Deity and penetrating into the heart of *tawhīd*.⁵

In other schools of *Kalām*, whether it be Mu'tazilitism and Māturidism in the Sunni world or Twelve-Iman Shī'ite theology, a greater role is given to reason in its interpretation of God's will as manifested in His revelation without, however, leading to the type of position known as rationalism in the modern Occident. Nor do these schools of theology, envisage anymore than Ash'arism, the role of the universal function of the intellect which includes what is known as

³ On the relation between faith and intellect or revelation and reason see F. Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom* (trans. GEH Palmer, London, 1976). "If 'no man cometh unto the Father but by Me,' this truth or this principle is equally applicable to the pure Intellect in ourselves: in the sapiential order—and it is only in this order that we may speak of intellect or intellectuality without making implacable reservations—it is essential to submit all the powers of the soul to the pure Spirit, which is identified, but in a supra formal and ontological manner, with the fundamental dogma of the Revelation and thereby with the *Sophia Perennis*" (F. Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam*, trans. by P. Townsend, London, 1970, P. 76). (Ed. note: The above-mentioned book is out of print, but readers can refer to the updated and re-translated chapter "Insights into the Muhammadan Phenomenon" in *Form and Substance in the Religions* by Schuon, World Wisdom, 2002.)

⁴ On Ash'arite voluntarism see F. Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, trans. J. P. Hobson, London, 1976, chapter 7. (Ed. note: Although the above-mentioned book is out of print, readers can refer instead to Schuon's "Dilemmas of Moslem Scholasticism" in *Christianity / Islam: Perspectives on Esoteric Ecumenism: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, World Wisdom, 2008.)

⁵ On Ash'arism and its views concerning the intellect see L. Gardet, *Introduction à la théologie musulmane*, Paris, 1948.

intuition as a means of attaining true knowledge. The function of *Kalām* has remained throughout Islamic history to find rational means to protect the citadel of faith (*al-imān*). It has not been to enable the intellect to penetrate into the inner courtyard of faith and become the ladder which leads to the very heart of the truth of religion. In fact it is not so much in theology but rather in religious philosophy and gnosis that we must seek for an explanation of the full meaning of the intellect and intuition and a complete methodology of knowledge in Islam.

In Islamic philosophy we can distinguish at least three schools which have dealt extensively with the methodology of knowledge and the full amplitude of the meaning of the intellect in its relation to intuition: Peripatetic (*mashshā'ī*) philosophy, illuminationist (*ishrāqī*) theosophy and the “transcendent theosophy” of Sadr al-Dīn Shirāzī.⁶ Although the *mashshā'ī* school in Islam drew most of its teachings from Aristotelianism and Neoplatonic sources, it is not a rationalistic school as this term is usually understood in Western philosophy. The *mashshā'ī* school is based on a view of the intellect which is properly speaking metaphysical and not merely philosophical and distinguishes clearly between the reflection of the intellect upon the human mind which is reason and the intellect in itself which transcends the realm of the individual.⁷

A complete treatment of the intellect and “a theory of knowledge” is to be found in the writings of the master of Muslim Peripatetics, Ibn Sīnā. Basing himself upon the treatises on the intellect (*al-Risālah fi'l-'aql*) by al-Kindī and al-Fārābī,⁸ Ibn Sīnā gave an extensive analysis of the meaning of the intellect in several of his works especially *The Book of Healing (al-Shifā')*, *The Book of Salvation (al-Najāt)* and his last masterpiece *The Book of Directives and Remarks*

⁶ On these schools see H. Corbin (in collaboration with S. H. Nasr and O. Yaha), *Historie de la philosophie islamique*, ol. 1, Paris, 1964; Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, Albany (N.Y.) 1975; Nasr, *The Transcendent Theosophy of Sadr al-Dīn Shirāzī*, London, 1978.

⁷ Classical philosophy, before its decadence, cannot itself be reduced to profane philosophy and is not merely of human inspiration. Rather it is based on a wisdom of Divine origin. It is only the rationalism of modern thought that has reduced the whole of ancient philosophy to a “harmless” antecedent of modern philosophy and refuses to see in a Pythagoras or a Plato anything more than somewhat more intelligent professors of philosophy as one would find in any contemporary Western university. It must be remembered that the Muslims called Plato the “Divine Plato” (*Aflātūn al-ilāhī*). Concerning intellectual intuition as it functions in the context of traditional wisdom or the *philosophia perennis* and ratiocination in modern philosophy, F. Schuon writes, “Intellectual intuition communicates *a priori* the reality of the Absolute.

“Rationalistic thought infers the Absolute by starting from the relative; thus it does not proceed by intellectual intuition, though it does not inevitably exclude it.

“For philosophy (in the profane sense) arguments have an absolute value; for intellectual intuition their value is symbolical and provisional” (*Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, trans. D. M. Matheson, London, 1953, p.106).

⁸ These treatises had a profound influence upon Western Scholasticism and were well known to the medieval masters such as St. Thomas and Duns Scotus.

(*Kitāb al-ishārāt wa'l-tanbīhāt*). Basing himself upon the Alexandrian commentators of Aristotle such as Themistius and Alexander Aphrodisias and with full awareness of the Quranic doctrine of revelation, Ibn Sīnā distinguishes between the Active Intellect (*al-'aql al-fa'āl*) which is universal and independent of the individual and the intellectual function within man. Each human being possesses intelligence in virtuality. This is called material or potential intelligence (*bi'l-quwwah*). As the human being grows in knowledge the first intelligible forms are placed in the soul from above and man attains to the level of the habitual intelligence (*bi'l-malakah*). As the intelligible becomes fully actualized in the mind, man reaches the level of actual intellect (*bi'l fi'l*) and finally as this process is completed, the acquired intelligence (*mustafād*). Finally above these stages and states stands the Active Intellect (*al-'aql al-fa'āl*) which is Divine and which illuminates the mind through the act of knowledge.⁹ According to Ibn Sīnā every act of cognition involves the illumination of the mind by the Active Intellect which bestows upon the mind the form whose knowledge is the knowledge of the subject in question. Although Ibn Sīnā denied the Platonic ideas, he stands certainly closer to the realists of the medieval West than to the nominalists. It is not accidental that the followers of St. Augustine were to rally around the teachings of Ibn Sīnā once his works were translated into Latin and that a school was developed which owed its origin to both St. Augustine and Ibn Sīnā.¹⁰

The *mashshā'ī* doctrine concerning the intellect and intuition can be summarized by saying that there are degrees of intellect which are attained as man advances in knowledge with the aid of the Active Intellect. As the intellect grows in strength and universality, it begins to acquire functions and powers which are identified with intuition rather than intellect in its analytical function connected with the act of ratiocination. The means of acquiring metaphysical knowledge is, according to Ibn Sīnā, intellectual intuition by which *ta'aqqul* should be translated rather than mere ratiocination. But by intuition here we mean not a sensual or biological power which leaps in the dark but a power which illuminates and removes the boundaries of reason and the limitations of individualistic existence.

In traditional Islamic sources the *mashshā'ī* school is usually called *hikmah bahthiyyah* (rational philosophy or more precisely argumentative philosophy) in contrast to the *ishrāqī* school which is called *hikmah dhawqiyyah* (intuitive philosophy). Although *mashshā'ī* philosophy is by no means merely rationalistic as shown above, it is in the *ishrāqī* or illuminative school of wisdom founded by Shaykh al-ishrāq Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī that the intuitive aspect of the intellect is fully emphasized and a ladder described reaching from sensual

⁹ See Ibn Sīnā, *Le livre des directives et remarques*, trans, A. M. Goichon, Beirut, 1951, pp. 324-326; and Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, London, 1978, chapter 14; also F. Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, London, 1958, pp. 11-29, which contains the translation of the relevant sections from the *Shifā'*.

¹⁰ See E. Gilson. "Les sources greco-arabes de l'augustinisme avicennisant," *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen-âge*, Paris, Vol. 4. 1929. pp. 5-149.

to principial, metaphysical knowledge. Suhrawardī, like such Western metaphysicians as St. Augustine and St. Thomas, emphasizes the principle of adequation or *adaequatio* (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*) according to which to each plane of reality there corresponds an instrument of knowledge adequate to the task of knowing that particular level of reality. But what characterizes and distinguishes *ishrāqī* epistemology is that according to this school every form of knowledge is the result of an illumination of the mind by the lights of the purely spiritual or intelligible world. Even the act of physical vision is possible because the soul of the beholder is illuminated by a light which in the very act of seeing embraces the object of vision. In the same way, the knowledge of a logical concept is made possible by the illumination of the mind at the moment when the very form of the logical concept in question is present in the mind.

As for higher forms of knowledge reaching into the empyrean of gnosis and metaphysics, they too are naturally the fruit of the light of the spiritual world shining upon the mind. In *ishrāqī* wisdom, therefore, there is no intellection without illumination and no true knowledge without the actual “tasting” (*dhawq*) of the object of that knowledge, that tasting which is none other than *sapientia* (whose Latin root *sapere* means literally to taste) or intuitive knowledge at its highest level of meaning.¹¹

As for the third school, associated with Mullā Sadrā, the views of both the Peripatetics and Illuminationists are incorporated by him, along with the Sufī doctrine of the “knowledge of the heart”, into a vast methodology of knowledge in which all the diverse faculties of knowing are to be found in a hierarchy leading from the sensual to the spiritual.¹² Each act of knowledge, according to Mullā Sadrā, involves the being of the knower and the hierarchy of the faculties of knowledge corresponds to the hierarchy of existence. Of particular interest is Mullā Sadrā’s insistence on the importance of the power of imagination (*takhayyul*) as an instrument of knowledge corresponding to the “world of imagination” (*‘ālam al-khayāl*) or *mundus imaginalis* which has an objective reality and stands between the physical and purely spiritual realms of existence.¹³ Corresponding to this world, man possesses an instrument of knowledge which is

¹¹ Suhrawardī’s epistemology is expounded in the second book of his *Hikmat al-ishrāq* but cannot be fully understood without the commentaries of Qutb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī and Shams al-Dīn al-Shahrazūrī. See the prolegomena of H. Corbin to Vol. 11 of Suhrawardī, *Oeuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, Tehran-Paris, 1977.

¹² Concerning Mullā Sadrā see S. H. Nasr, *Sadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī and His Transcendent Theosophy*; the introduction of H. Corbin to Mullā Sadrā, *Le livre des pénétrations métaphysiques*, Tehran-Paris, 1964; and F. Rahman, *The Philosophy of Mullā Sadrā*, New York, 1975, which, however, gives a somewhat excessively rationalistic interpretation of the master of “the transcendent theosophy.”

¹³ The impoverished modern vision of reality did not only banish the angels from the cosmos after Leibnitz, but also reduced the *mundus imaginalis* to pure whim and fancy with which the word “imagination” is identified today. Perhaps with H. Corbin, one should use the term “imaginal” to distinguish the traditional meaning of “*imaginalis*” from all that the word “imaginary” brings to mind.

neither sensual nor intellectual but which fills the domain in between. This power of creative imagination which is only perfected in the Universal Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), is able to create forms in the imaginal world and know these forms ontologically. According to Mullā Sadrā, the very existence of these forms is the knowledge of them in the same way that according to Suhrawardī God's knowledge of the world *is* the very reality of the world. In any case the harmony and balance between intellect and intuition is perfected by Mullā Sadrā through his recourse to this intermediate domain and the intermediate faculty of knowing this domain, the faculty which is none other than the power of "imagination" (*takhayyul*) residing in the soul and integrally related to the rational, intellectual and intuitive faculties of the soul.

The fullest meaning of the intellect and its universal function is to be found in the *ma'rifah* or gnosis, which lies at the heart of the Islamic revelation and which is crystalized in the esoteric dimension of Islam identified for the most part with Sufism. There are verses of the Holy Quran and *hadiths* of the Holy Prophet which allude to the heart as the seat of intelligence and knowledge. The heart is the instrument of true knowledge as its affliction is the cause of ignorance and forgetfulness. That is why the message of the revelation addresses the heart more than the mind as the following verses of the Holy Quran reveals:

O men, now there has come to you
an admonition from your Lord, and
a healing for what is in the breasts (namely the heart)
and a guidance, and a mercy to the believers.

Surah *Jonah* (10); v. 57 (Arberry translation).

In the same way, it is the knowledge gained by the heart which counts before the Divine. Again to quote the Holy Quran:

God will not take you to task for a slip
in your oaths; but He will take you to task
for what you hearts have earned; and God
is All-forgiving, All-clement.

Surah *The Cow* (2); v. 225 (Arberry translation).

Likewise, the knowledge of the heart, at least at some level, is considered as essential for salvation, for, those who refuse to identify themselves with the heart or centre of their living forfeit the possibility of entering into Paradise, which already resides at the centre of the heart, as the famous dictum of Christ "The Kingdom of God is within you" testifies. The Holy Quran asserts:

Concerning this imaginal world see H. Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*, trans. R. Mannheim, Princeton, 1969; and also Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: from Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, trans. H. Pearson, Princeton, 1977.

We have created for Gehenna many jinn and men;
They have hearts, but understand not with them (*lahum qulūb^{um} lā yaʿfahūna bihā*).
Surah *The Battlement* (7), v. 179 (Arberry translation).

In the *Hadīth* literature there are also numerous references to the knowledge the heart, a knowledge which is principal and essential and identified with faith, as the following *hadīth* quoted by Bukhārī demonstrates:

Faith descended at the root of the hearts of men, then came down the Quran and (people) learned from the Quran and from the example (of the Prophet).¹⁴

Also, that heart is considered praiseworthy which grasps for knowledge, for as the Holy Prophet has said, “Blessed is he who makes his heart grasping.”¹⁵ It could in fact be said that in the language of the Holy Quran and *Hadith* the heart means essentially the seat of knowledge or the instrument for the attainment of knowledge. It is upon this foundation that the Sufis have developed the doctrine of “the knowledge of the heart” which has occupied so many of the great masters of Sufism.

The Sufis speak of the “eye of the heart” (*‘ayn al-qalb* in Arabic and *chishm-i dil* in Persian) as the “third eye” which is able to gain a knowledge different from that gained by the physical eyes yet direct and immediate like physical vision.¹⁶ As the famous Persian poet Hātif states:

Open the ‘eye of the heart’ so that thou canst see the spirit
and gain a vision of that which is invisible.

This knowledge which is identified with the heart is principal knowledge gained through an instrument which is identified with the heart or the centre of being of man rather than the mind which knows only indirectly and which is a projection of the heart. The heart is not simply identified with sentiments which are contrasted in modern philosophy with reason. Man does not possess only the faculty of reason and the sentiments or emotions, which are contrasted with reason. Rather, he is capable of an intellectual knowledge which transcends the dualism and dichotomy between reason and emotions, or the mind and the heart as they are usually understood. It is the loss of gnosis or truly intellectual knowledge in an operative and realized manner in the modern world that has caused the eclipse of the traditional conception of the “knowledge of the heart”, a knowledge which is at once intellectual and intuitive in the profoundest meaning of these terms.

¹⁴ Quoted in *Sayings of Muhammad*, ed. and trans. Mirzā Abu’l-Fadl, Allahabad, 1924, p. 51.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 229.

¹⁶ On the symbolism of the “eye of the heart” see F. Schuon, *L’Oeil du coeur*, Paris, 1976. (Ed. note: The English translation of this book by Schuon is *The Eye of the Heart: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Spiritual Life*, World Wisdom, 1997.)

To understand fully the intellectual knowledge identified with the heart, it is necessary to return to the distinction between “presential” (*hudurī*) and “attained” (*husūlī*) knowledge: All rational knowledge related to the mind is made possible through concepts which are “attained” by the mind. All mental knowledge is “attained” knowledge. Mentally and rationally man can only know fire or water through the concept of fire or water abstracted through the senses and made available by the various mental faculties for the analytical faculty of the mind identified with reason. But there is another type of knowledge, possible for all men, but in practice attained only by the few. It is a knowledge which is direct and immediate without the knowledge identified with the heart. The knowledge of the heart has the immediacy and directness of sensual knowledge but concerns the intelligible or spiritual world. When man gains knowledge of the perfume of a rose through direct experience of the olfactory faculty, he does not gain knowledge of the concept of the perfume of the rose but a direct knowledge of it. For most men this kind of knowledge is limited to the sensual world, but for the gnostic whose eye of his heart is opened through spiritual practice there is the possibility of a knowledge which has the directness of sensual experience but concerns the supernal realities. From the point of view of this “presential” knowledge, this supreme form of knowing in which ultimately the subject and object of knowledge are the same, the most concrete of all realities is the Supreme Principle. Everything else is relatively speaking an abstraction. To know in an ultimate sense is to know God through a knowledge which is both intellection and intuition in the highest meaning of these terms. It is to know the fire by being burned and consumed in it; it is to know water by being immersed in the ocean of Universal Existence.

In the Islamic perspective, therefore, one can speak of a hierarchy of knowledge ranging from the sensual, through the imaginal and the rational, to the intellectual which is also intuitive and identified with the heart. But just as the rational faculty of knowledge is not opposed to the sensual, the intellectual and intuitive are not opposed to the rational. Rather, the mind is a reflection of the heart, the centre of the microcosm. The Islamic doctrine of Unity (*al-tawhīd*) has been able to embrace all modes of knowing into complimentary and not contending stages of a hierarchy leading to that supreme form of knowledge, that gnosis of the purified heart which is ultimately none other than the unitive and unifying knowledge of the One and the most profound realization of Unity (*al-tawhīd*) which is the Alpha and Omega of the Islamic revelation.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

‘Do not think that the afflictions of the world leave Me indifferent. I love souls and I want to save them. To attain My end I use hardship, but it is through pure mercy. In many times of abundance, souls forget Me and are lost, whereas in distress they turn to Me and are saved.’

Sister Consolata.