



Concept of Knowledge in Contemporary times: An Islamic Critique

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ABSTRACT:

Knowledge has always received an important place in all the major civilizations of the world whether ancient or modern, eastern or western. It is always the presence of knowledge which gives a proper shape to both the inward and outward aspect of humans. Whether a community is civilized or not depends upon how much knowledgeable its individuals are. Moreover in the establishment and orientation of any civilization knowledge has always played a pivotal role. History bears witness that humans in the form of Prophets, Saints, Philosophers, Poets have always strived for the achievement of true knowledge. What is true knowledge? What are its sources? What is its purpose? All these questions have remained subject of discussion in the entire course of human history and the matter of fact is that there exists a separate branch in philosophy i.e Epistemology which discusses this subject through and through. Islam being the order of this whole cosmos has got its own worldview which is deeply rooted in the principle of *tawhid* and it is this principle which gives a distinguishing shape to its epistemology. Unlike Islamic notion, Knowledge in the contemporary world especially in the western context is devoid of any godliness and is deeply rooted in such theories which especially emerged in the post-renaissance period i.e. rationalism, humanism, scientism etc. This paper is a humble attempt to discuss the concept of knowledge in Islam and how it differs from the knowledge structure of the contemporary world especially the western one.

Keywords: *Knowledge, Epistemology, Renaissance, Tawhid, Rationalism, Humanism, Scientism etc.*



What is Knowledge?

Perhaps this has been one of the most difficult and puzzling question in the history of human beings and humans most of the times have found difficulty in answering this question efficiently. The Oxford dictionary of English language defines knowledge as:

“Facts, information, and skills acquired through experience or education; the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject”.¹

Webster’s dictionary defines knowledge as:

“The fact or condition of knowing something with familiarity gained through experience or association”.²

Philosophically, Knowledge has been defined by philosophers in a number of ways resulting in the emergence of a number of knowledge theories in ancient as well as in modern times. The traditional theory of knowledge as given by Plato in his dialogue Theatatus defines knowledge as justified true belief. According to this definition three conditions must fulfil if someone claims to know something. First the proposition should be true and not false, secondly, the person should be in a position to accept this proposition and thirdly this proposition should be justified or evident for that person. Thus, this classical theory of knowledge given by Plato may be put as:

S knows p if and only if

- (i) p is true;
- (ii) S believes that p ;
- (iii) S is justified in believing that p .

Where S stands for a subject or knower and p stands for a proposition.³

Although this theory has been challenged on various grounds by many philosophers especially by Bertrand Russell, A. Meinong and Edmund L. Gettier. Gettier in his paper entitled as "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" published in 1963 questioned the various aspects of this theory and highlighted the need for the fourth condition along with the already existing three conditions The problem has since become known as, "the Gettier problem" or "the problem of the fourth condition,"⁴ but it should be noted that in ancient Greek it was



Plato who discussed the problem of knowledge at length and came up with the definition as mentioned above. Until then every true belief was being considered as Knowledge. It was Plato who added the third condition of justification besides truth and belief for anything to be treated as knowledge.

Knowledge: Joint enterprise of humanity

Since knowledge comprises of the sum total of all the facts and observations humans have got. It is a wealth which is jointly accumulated by humans, spread throughout the globe, in the entire course of history. It is a fact that some civilizations have contributed more to the knowledge corpus whereas some have made small contribution, but there is no denying the fact that it has been a joint endeavor of whole humanity. Unfortunately in the modern world (during the 14th until 20th century) western scholarship due to its Eurocentric view of the development of sciences undermined the role of Muslim scientists and philosophers in the development and transmission of the scientific heritage of Greco-Roman world to Europe. Even though considerable attention has been devoted in recent times by western historians to the contribution of Muslim scientists and scholars in diverse fields ranging from pure sciences to humanities and social sciences, they have tended to diminish their stature by presenting them merely as translators and transmitters of Greek ideas to Europe during the middle Ages. This is but a reflection of Eurocentric bias which has been so characteristic of Western scholarship. George de Santillana rightly describes this situation as “Turning a great civilization into a service department of Western History”. Fortunately, during the same period, apart from Muslims, some of the prominent western scholars notably George Sarton, Robert Briffault and others have highlighted the contribution of Muslim scholars in the making of contemporary world of knowledge explosion. To this effect Robert Briffault states: “What we call science arose in Europe as a result of a new spirit of inquiry, of new methods of investigation, of the development of mathematics in a form unknown to the Greeks. That spirit and those methods were introduced into the European world by the Arabs.”⁵

Impetus behind the Muslim quest for Knowledge:

As far as the Muslim civilization is concerned, it was because of the vibrant and dynamic teachings of Qur’an and the model exemplified by their messenger that they excelled in every field of life. As far as the knowledge is concerned the very process of revelation upon Prophet



Muhammad (saw) started with the imperative '*iqra*' i.e. to read, the revolutionary effect of this revelation was that at the dawn of 7th century there were just 17 or 18 people in Makah⁶ (which at that time was the hub of all intellectual, cultural and commercial activities) who could read and write but with the commencement of divine guidance upon Arabs, who were hitherto better known as *Ummis* (unlettered), in the form of Qur'an and the charismatic personality of prophet Muhammad (saw), who himself claimed to have been sent by his Lord for the purpose of educating the whole mankind⁷ only after twenty five years the annals of history got changed and there came about more than a million people at the farewell sermon of Prophet Muhammad (saw) who could not only read and write but were so highly intellectual that afterwards they were able to surpass the well established and refined civilization of Romans and Persians which in the then existing world were the forerunners of humanity as far as the civilizational march and intellectual vigour is concerned as is testified by the historical records.

'Knowledge' in the modern times:

In the traditional era almost all the major traditions of the world used to perceive reality as one single entity comprising of various levels i.e natural as well as supra-natural, physical as well as meta physical, corporeal as well as spiritual, material as well as transcendental and the knowledge was having the vertical as well as horizontal direction and at the centre of all the activities of man there was the presence of god which was one of the distinguishing and characteristic feature of traditional world from the modern world. In the modern times, there occurred a major shift in the overall thinking of the 'modern man' and from being God-centric he became man-centric as there arose the rationalism of Descartes who propounded his rational faculty as an evidence for his existence in his famous '*cogito ergo sum*'. Whereas Descartes emphasis was on rationalism, another renaissance thinker John Locke favoured empiricism as against the rationalism of Descartes but both paved the way for the establishment of new method of scientific enquiry. Jennifer Nagel writes about this as:

Locke's empiricism and Descartes' rationalism emphasize different aspects of the new ways of thinking about nature that emerge in the Early Modern period. Descartes focuses on the importance of mathematical and abstract ideas; Locke focuses on the importance of experience and observation. Given that these thinkers both share the Early Modern agenda of supporting the new scientific way of thinking they produce different theories of knowledge,⁸ the reason being



that they approach the problem of knowledge from different perspectives. Although they differ from each other in many aspects but both seem to be more focused and concerned upon the physical and material world laying more emphasis on empiricism and rationalism and neglecting the supra material and transcendental levels of existence. It is important to understand the term early modern agenda in the above passage. It is perhaps due to this 'modern agenda' that the extensive and all encompassing notion of knowledge which hitherto approached the reality in Toto was confined within the observable world and the primarily human thinking remained within the bounds of natural world and anything beyond the realm of this world was virtually considered as nonexistent. Scientism took the place of religion which afterwards was labeled as 'the opium of masses'⁹ and the supreme and absolute position of God (since god in real sense of the term became nonexistent) was accorded by man to himself. Thus this radical shift and reductionism at the epistemological level brought chaos in the overall order and balance of this whole cosmos resulting in a series of crisis which the entire mankind, ranging from the individual (depression) to the whole humanity (environmental crisis) is confronted with. Syed Naquib Al-Attas while describing the lacunas of this epistemology holds:

it formulates its vision of truth and reality not upon revealed knowledge amid religious belief, but rather upon cultural tradition reinforced by strictly philosophical premises based upon speculations pertaining mainly to secular life centered upon man as physical entity and rational animal, setting great store upon man's rational capacity alone to unravel the mysteries of his total environment and involvement in existence, and to conceive out the results of speculations based upon such premises his evolutionary, ethical and moral values to guide and order his life accordingly.¹⁰

The holy Quran holding man responsible for all his misdeeds holds:

"Mischiefs have appeared on land and sea because of (the deeds) that the hands of men have earned, that (Allah) may give them a taste of some of their deeds: in order that they may turn back (from Evil)"¹¹

The divine revelation had much earlier warned humanity not to forget the omniscience and transcendence of their Lord as it will result in the forgetfulness of their own limits in their entire existence. The holy Qur'an states:

"And be not as those who forgot Allah so He caused them to forget their own souls. These! They are the transgressors"¹²



Knowledge and Islam:

The emergence of last prophet in the institution of prophet hood at the dawn of seventh century marks undoubtedly the beginning of a revolutionary phenomenon in the annals of human history. It was the knowledge structure established and formulated upon the revelation (which Islam considers as the only source of absolute and infallible knowledge) and the perfect and exemplary human model of its Messenger that within no time Islam attracted millions of people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds to its fold. It was the dynamism of its knowledge structure geared at the entire reality addressing the whole humanity as one single community irrespective of all kinds of differences in caste, colour and language which attracted the people from all around the world to its fold. Right from the very outset Islam laid special emphasis upon knowledge and its acquisition as mentioned earlier, so much so that any thought of equality between a knowledgeable person and ignorant is rejected. Qur'an holds:

“Say thou: shall they who know and those who know not be held equal? It is only men of understanding who receive admonition”¹³

God consciousness and piety which hold the central position in the Islamic religious life can be achieved only by those who are equipped with knowledge. Qur'an in an unqualified manner holds:

“Those of His bondsmen fear Allah who Have Knowledge”¹⁴

The concept and notion of knowledge is so pivotal and so significant that in the holy Qur'an alone we find more than 800 references to it. One frequently comes across such terms as *Aql*, *Fikr*, *ilm*, *al-ilm*, *hikmah*, etc stressing the importance and essence concept of knowledge holds in the weltanschauung of Islam.

The importance of knowledge holds so much importance in the worldview of Islam that Prophet who was bestowed with enormous knowledge and wisdom still was ordained by Almighty to pray for the increase in his Knowledge.

Owing to its difficult and complicated nature many reputed Muslim scholars in the legacy of Muslim civilization held that knowledge cannot be defined while some were of the opinion that it can only be defined through disjunction (*qismah*) and example (*mithal*). Apart from



this historically we find knowledge defined by Muslim scholars in various ways. Muslim lexicographer Ragib al Isfahani defines the term as:

“Knowledge is the awareness of a thing with reference to its reality.”¹⁵

There are a number of definitions of this term as can be seen in Rosenthal’s Knowledge triumphant but the basic idea and principle in almost all of them is same i.e. awareness, perception and acquaintance with reality

Apart from defining the term lexically, the Muslim scholars have approached the problem of knowledge from various perspectives. Whereas philosophers like Ibn Sina and Al-Farabi approach it in a philosophical way, the theologians like al-Shaf’i and Ibn Abdul Barr approach it more in a theological way. In comparison to this the Sufi approach seems more tilted towards intuition and such other tendencies but in all these approaches the spirit and inspiration comes from the primary sources of Islam i.e Quran and Sunnah and no one denies the fact that the fountain of all knowledge is Allah and the supreme purpose and purport of all forms of knowledge is to know Him.

Since the Islamic concept of knowledge ought to be deeply rooted within the paradigm of primary sources of Islam due to the fact that they form the very basis of Islamic ontology. Therefore it is imperative to highlight briefly some of the quintessential features of this ontology which serve as the basis for the entire knowledge corpus in Islam and which largely distinguish it from various knowledge structures which emerged in modern and postmodern period. These include:

1. Unity of God:

The entire worldview of Islam rests on the very principle of Tawhid. It refers to the absolute unity, omnipotence and supremacy of Allah in all the affairs of the whole cosmos. Being the absolute One everything else as creation is entirely separate and different from Him. He is the absolute source of all knowledge On the other hand it automatically points out the existential limits of all the creations including man. Moreover in Islam God is not only the creator but also the sustainer and upholder of the entire world. Thus this cardinal principle sets the structure of entire course of man’s relationship with his creator and with the rest of the world. To acknowledge and understand this principle is to discover that the entire world has been created and governed by a supreme authority and everything in this world is meant to serve a definite purpose. This principle makes man aware of his creator at each and every level of his



consciousness. It is the presence of this very cardinal principle in Islam which enables man to think beyond the realm of physical world and not to remain confined within its limits. The acceptance of this absolute reality automatically makes man to accept and validate revelation as an absolute source of knowledge necessary for the other sources of knowledge in order to safeguard humanity from any pitfalls whatsoever.

2. Unity of Humanity:

Islam firmly believes in this principle, It categorically denounces any notion of superiority or inferiority on the basis of gender, ethnicity or any other notion. In Islam superiority or inferiority may only result from the level of piety and godliness one is acquainted with.

It is only because of the lack understanding about this principle that we find a bias and a sense of Eurocentric tendencies in the knowledge structures which emerged in the post renaissance period from the western world as Edward Said has beautifully elaborated in his Orientalism.

3. Unity of Knowledge:

In Islam all knowledge emerges and originates from Allah who is the source of all knowledge. So knowledge in Islam is essentially one single reality deeply rooted in truth and devoid of any kind of falsehood. In Islam any water-tight compartmentalization of knowledge as religious or secular or this worldly and that worldly is strongly resisted. Thus all the valid sources of knowledge are not only accepted but integrated in Islamic ontology and it incorporates both sensory and rational faculties of man and makes them to work under the broader and absolute canopy of revelation. Moreover, the supreme purpose and ultimate aim of all knowledge in Islam is to know God.

Besides these, the principles of *Taskhir* (Subservience), *Amanah* (Trusteeship) and *Khilafah* (vice regency) make the concept of knowledge in Islam more balanced and fascinating.

Conclusion:

Thus from the above study it follows that the knowledge present in the contemporary times, (which continues to develop on the structure provided by the West in the backdrop of empiricism, rationalism, humanism, scientism and other such theories during the post renaissance period) is essentially devoid of any transcendence and as such considers anything beyond the realm of this material world virtually as non-existent. It is because of this that the whole humanity although achieving so many feats in the material domain faces so many sufferings on the spiritual front. On



the other hand Islam has much to offer keeping in view the holistic and integral nature of its worldview. Moreover, it has ample potential to play a corrective role in the existing structure of epistemology in order to fulfill its divinely ordained responsibility and alleviate the sufferings to which the whole humanity has been subjected in the contemporary times besides also paving the way for the revival of Muslim *Ummah*.

¹ Oxford Living Dictionaries, Knowledge,

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/knowledge>, Accessed on 20, Nov, 2017

² Merriam Webster, Knowledge, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/knowledge>, Accessed on 21, Nov, 2017

³ Nagel, Jonathan (2014) A very short introduction to Knowledge , London, Oxford University press, pp. 68-73

⁴ This discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. For a detailed discussion one may see Chisholm, Roderick (1989), Theory of knowledge, London, Prentice Hall International
Woolley, Anthony Douglas., (1976) Theory of Knowledge, London Hutchinson and Co

⁵ Briffault, Robert, (1919), The Making of Humanity, London, Allen and Unwin p. 191

⁶ Biladhuri, Ahmad ibn jabir., (1978), Futuh al Buldan, Beirut, Maktaba al hilal, pp. 457-58

⁷ Ibn Yazīd, Muḥ ammad (2010) Sunan ibn Majah, Riyadh, Dar as Salam, Hadith No. 234

⁸ Nagel, *op.cit*, p.65

⁹ Pals, Daniel L (2006) Eight Theories of Religion, New York, Oxford University Press, p.133

¹⁰ Al-Attas, Syed Naquib (1987) Islam and Secularism, Malaysia, Art Printing works, p.135

¹¹ Al-Qur'an, 30:41.

¹² Ibid, 59:19

¹³ Ibid, 39:09

¹⁴ Ibid, 35:28

¹⁵ Raghīb al-Isfahani, (2008) Al Mufradat fi Gharaib al-Qur'an, Beirut, Dar al Marifah, p.343