

Is Knowledge a Mental Aid, or Burden?

In Book Two of the noble *Mathnawī*, Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Mawlawī [Balkhī ar-Rūmī] has a short and elegant story. An ignorant desert Arab has a sack full of grain and he wants it to load on top of his camel. But instead of dividing it into two, he takes another sack full of sand so as to balance the weight of the sack full of grain and load the two on both sides of the camel. Along the way, a sage man becomes his co-traveler and talks with him. As he finds out that one half of the load is sand and it only causes trouble, he suggests to the Arab to empty the sack full of sand and to fill in its stead half of the grain so that the purpose [of having a balanced load over the camel] is also met and at the same time the camel's load would become lighter.

Being glad of the wise solution and after executing the suggestion, the Arab asked the sage about his wealth and riches as he assumes that having this cogent mind he is supposed to possess everything. However, the sage sorrowfully answers that he possesses nothing in this world:

در همه مُلک و جوه و قوت شب

گفت: "وا؟ نیست یا وجهالعرب

هر که نانی میدهد، آنجا روم

پا برهنه تن برهنه مدوم

نیست حاصل جز خیال و دردسر"

مر مرا زین حکمت و فضل و هنر

*"By God," he replied, "O chief of the Arabs, in my whole property
There is not the means of (buying) food for the night.*

*I run about with bare feet and naked body.
If any one will give me a loaf of bread—thither I go.
From this wisdom and learning and excellence (of mind)
I have nothing but phantasy and headache.* [289]

Astonished and disappointed by the futility of such knowledge, the Arab prefers his form of ignorance to such ominous wisdom and he asks the sage to part ways with him so that his misfortune would not descend upon him:

دور بر آن حکمت شومت ز من نطق تو شوم است بر اهل زَمَن

یا تو آن سو رو، من این سو مدوم ورتو راه پیش، من واپس روم

یک جوالم گندم و دیگر ز ریگ به بود زین حيله های مرده ریگ

احمقیم بس مبارک احمقاست که دلم با برگ و جانم متقی است

*Take far away from me that unlucky wisdom of yours:
Your speech is unlucky for (all) the people of the time.
Either you go in that direction, or I will run in this direction;
Or if your way be forwards, I will go back.
One sack of wheat and the other of sand
Is better for me than these vain contrivings.
My foolishness is a very blessed foolishness, for my heart is well-furnished
(With spiritual graces) and my soul is devout.* [290]

Then out of this story Mawlānā arrives at this conclusion:

راه، آن باشد که پیش آید شہی

فکر، آن باشد که بگشاید رھی

The right thought is that which opens a way:

The (right) way is that on which a (spiritual) king advances.[291]

From the viewpoint of Mawlānā, it is not the discussion on the root of knowledge and the necessity of knowing; neither does he mean bestowing superiority to ignorance over wisdom. Instead, his point is that man should benefit from his knowledge and this knowledge should transform his life.

Such knowledge stands on top in self-cognition; not knowledge of the horizontal and outer phenomena. Anyone who, without paying attention to this truth, is in pursuit of profusely acquiring knowledge and lets diverse and secondary information fill his memory to the brim is, in fact, overburdening himself and placing insurmountable hurdles in his way. Those who are like him know so many things about everything. But, this knowledge has no influence on their fate and if all this learning can be taken away from them, they will still pursue their past life. Concerning such type of people, Mawlānā says:

جان خود رامی نداند آن ظلوم

صدهزاران فصل داند از علوم

در بیان جوهر خود چون خری

داند او خاصیت هر جوهری

He knows a hundred thousand superfluous matters[292] connected with

The (various) sciences, (but) that unjust man does not know his own soul.

He knows the special properties of every substance, (but) in elucidating

His own substance (essence) he is (as ignorant) as an ass.[293]

The approach to the issue of knowledge of one of the two prominent branches of Western contemporary philosophy, i.e. existentialism, is the same. Kierkegaard, the precursor of existentialism, divides truth into exoteric and esoteric, or exact and imaginary. Exoteric truths are those accomplishments of science while esoteric truths are rooted in the soul of man. These esoteric truths, that he has named as 'existential truths,' are interwoven with the destiny of man and determine the trend of his life.

Every kind of knowledge should be exploited and utilized while keeping in view its role in determining and nurturing man's existential truths. As such, according to Kierkegaard, all kinds of knowledge are not equal in rank and worth. Rather, they are classified according to their functions with respect to man. The kinds of knowledge are considered more valuable that give answers to the 'whys' questions instead of

the 'whats'.^[294]

In conclusion, knowledge for the sake of knowledge is not that important. Rather, it is due to its guiding role that it is praiseworthy. Now, we will deal with Imam Khomein's views on issues concerning knowledge by examining them under the following headings:

- The place of knowledge;
- The instrumental role of knowledge;
- The branches of knowledge and realms of human existence; and
- Ignorance as a pretext in neglecting knowledge.

The place of knowledge

Having roots in our religious tradition in which seeking knowledge is deemed equal to military campaign and the ink of the scholars is even viewed as holier than the blood of the martyrs, Imam Khomein (r) thinks within this framework. According to him,

- ☐ Knowledge makes a man;
- ☐ The universe itself is a large university;
- ☐ Knowledge is a requisite for prosperity;
- ☐ Knowledge and expertise is a criterion of superiority;
- ☐ Knowledge means continuous learning.

1. Knowledge makes a man

Concerning the caliphate (his appointment as God's vicegerent on earth) of Adam ('a) we read that God taught him the names of things. Then He tested the angels with respect to these names (in which they failed to give answer). Thus, He proved to them that the reason behind Adam's ('a) superiority is these very names.^[295]

When man was also separated from other animals and brought them under his dominance, he utilized the weapon of knowledge and established an enduring civilization. If we efface knowledge from the life

of man we will confront our peer creatures as well as other levels (species) of creatures, and not more than that. “It is the pen, knowledge and speech that can build man, and not machine guns and other destructive powers. Machine guns as well as other implements of war came into existence under the aegis of knowledge.”[296]

2. The universe itself is a large university

If we accept that the tradition of tests and trials are prevalent everywhere, and that man has no respite for even a moment from not being tested, and if we accept that every test entails lessons and teaching, we will then accept the conclusion that the whole world is, for us, essentially the place of learning and accumulation of knowledge. As such, *madrasahs* [schools] and *maktabs* [old-fashioned primary schools] are not the only specific places with particular lessons. Rather, all places are schools and everything is a lesson.

The teacher and student are not surrounded by teachers of the universities and high schools or the rest of places, and the student too is not surrounded by those who go to the university. The universe is a university while the prophets, *awliyā'* and those trained by them are the teachers and the rest of mankind are students, and they ought to be students.[297]

3. Knowledge as a requisite for prosperity

Knowing the way from the well depends on vision (being able to see) and seeing, in turn, is the result of knowledge. So, knowledge is regarded as the light of man in guaranteeing his prosperity and the ground for his advancement and excellence. “It is through knowledge that man can secure his prosperity in this world and the next. It is through teaching that man can train and educate the youth in such a way that they are able to safeguard their own interests in this world and the hereafter.”[298]

4. Knowledge and expertise as a criterion of superiority

By raising an amazing question which, at the same time, contains its own answer, the Glorious Qur'an, shows us the criterion of superiority and prominence: “***Are those who know equal with those who***

know not?”[299]

Hence, apart from considering knowledge as particularly valuable, Islam also regards it as the standard of superiority. “Islam strives to that extent for the experts and specialists. In both common laws and religious laws it has given preference to the (one who is) more expert; it has given preference to the more expert opinion.”[300]

5. Knowledge as continuous learning

Knowledge will acquire its fundamental function when it is pursued throughout one’s life; not like medicine which is used only in times of sickness. Knowledge is like food that is always needed by the living organism. Therefore it should be planned in such a way as to be present throughout man’s existence.

Up to the last moment of his life man is in need of knowledge, learning and training. No man could be independent from (not in need of) knowledge or be independent from learning and training. What some individuals imagine that our time for learning lessons has already passed is not correct. Learning a lesson has no specific time. As what has been stated in the *hadīth* that [seeking] knowledge is from cradle up to the grave, if a man in the agony of death can learn a single word, it is better for him than to die as ignorant of it.[301]

The instrumental role of knowledge

Notwithstanding all these emphases of ours on knowledge and seeking knowledge, the principle that knowledge itself is not the aim should not be forgotten. Rather, it has [merely] an instrumental role and it is valuable and desirable to the extent that it performs its role. If one day this role is forgotten and knowledge itself became the goal, then the fall of man will commence. Knowledge is valuable to the extent that, just like a vehicle or animal for riding, it can transport us to our destination. Now, if these mount or means of transportation malfunction— however ostensibly ornamented it may be —it cannot be of use to us.

The Imām’s approach in this context is an existential one. It is from this aspect that knowledge ought to be an instrument for man’s dominance and prosperity, and not that it becomes a goal itself and a hindrance for the realization of other goals. This existential approach to knowledge is regarded as an

integral part of his moral thought. From his perspective, all sciences should lead to a certain destination and deliver man from this narrow pass of the world.

Otherwise, learning them is not only worthless but they themselves also veil the way and are a hindrance to perfection. If ignorance is a dark veil, knowledge can also be a luminous one the removal of which is more difficult, because like a wall seen through its glass cladding which hardly anybody can detect as being a covering and so it misguides [the people] constantly. Hence, he describes this point in this manner:

If the doctrinal sciences and doctrinal truths are studied for their own sake and if all the related concepts, terms, high-sounding expressions, and embellished juxtapositions of terms be learned for the sake of showing off to feeble minds and for the sake of obtaining worldly status, then they cannot be called *ʿilm al-muhkam*; rather they must be named obscuring veils and hollow fantasies. That is because if one's purpose in learning the sciences should not be to reach God, the Exalted, and to realize the Names and Attributes and to mould one's self in accordance with the Divine character [*takhalluq beh akhlāq Allah*], each of such acquisitions of his is a dungeon of hell and a black veil that darkens his heart and blinds his insight.[302]

This issue is not particular to this-worldly or that-worldly sciences. Rather, every knowledge that does not lead to the True Beloved is a [mere] mental burden. Sometimes, even gnosticism [*ʿirfān*] and knowledge of monotheism [*tawhīd*], instead of being a guide and leader, can also be the impediment in the way to perfection and bring about eternal destruction and perdition. So, it causes pride and superiority complex in a gnostic [*ʿarif*] as a result of which, he remains a captive of terminologies, explanations and descriptions.

The story of the scholar which the Glorious Qur'an indicates points to this truth. That scholar—who has been mentioned in the Islamic sources as Bal'am al-Ba'ūr—instead of benefiting from the divine sciences at his disposal and converting them into a springboard to heaven, made use of them as a rope in going down the bottomless pit of adversity. Consequently, he was cursed by God and became like a dog.[303]

The Imām points to the destiny of those who were corrupted by knowledge—even divine knowledge—in this manner:

With this short life and limited knowledge, I have seen certain people among these so-called mystics and other scholars who, I swear by *ʿirfan* and knowledge that these terms have not made any mark on their hearts; nay, they have rather left on them an opposite effect...

O amateurish student of concepts who has gone astray of the realities! Deliberate over the matter for a while, and think as to what knowledge you possess of God. What impact has the knowledge of God and His Attributes made on your self? Perhaps the study of music and musical rhythms may be more exact

and precise than your knowledge. Astronomy, mechanics, other physical sciences, and mathematics can match your learning as to the precision of their terminology. Yet, in the same way as they are not concerned with the knowledge of God, your knowledge also is a thick curtain consisting of the veils of words, terms, and concepts. They can neither make one ecstatic nor send anyone into a trance.

Rather, in the eyes of the *Sharḥ*, the physical sciences and mathematics are better than your knowledge, since they produce some result, whereas your knowledge not only gives no good results, but gives opposite ones. An engineer draws results from his calculations, and a goldsmith is benefited from his craftsmanship; but your knowledge, apart from not gaining any material benefits, has failed to fulfill any transcendental ends as well... knowledge, which darkens the heart and increases it in its blindness, is not knowledge.[304]

In short, knowledge with all the values that it possesses is desirable and ideal so long as it can pave the way for man and lead him toward his True Object of Worship, or at least, His Proximity.

The branches of knowledge and realms of human existence

With his practical and existential approach to sciences the Imām attempts to evaluate and categorize these on the basis of their functions. According to him the practical merit of knowledge determines its own station.

Thus, he makes this criterion the basis of categorization and assessment of sciences, on the basis of which he endeavors to explain the *hadīth* that views sciences as having three branches. It is narrated in the said *hadīth* that the Messenger of God (s) once entered the mosque where there was a group of people surrounding a man. Instead of “Who is that?” “What is that?” inquired the Prophet (s) as a sign of contempt of the person and his deeds. He was told, “He is an ‘*allīmah*, (i.e. a very learned man) and is the most learned of men regarding Arab genealogies, past episodes, the days of the *jihiliyyah* [Ignorance] and Arabic poetry.” The Prophet (s) said, “That is a knowledge whose ignorance does not harm one nor is its possession of any benefit to one.” Then the Prophet (s) declared, “Verily, knowledge consists of these three: the firm sign [*ḥayah muhkamah*], the just duty [*farḍah ‘dilah*] and the established *sunnah* [*sunnah q’imah*]. All else is superfluous.”[305]

The Imām makes this *hadīth* the basis of his categorization of sciences and in the first degree he divides all sciences into three branches: those that are beneficial, those that are detrimental, and those that are worthless.

Thus, all the sciences are divisible into three kinds: first, those sciences, which are beneficial to man in

view of the other stages of existence, success wherein is the ultimate purpose of creation... The second kind consists of those which are harmful for man and lead him to neglect his essential duties. This kind consists of the blameworthy sciences and one must refrain from their pursuit... Thirdly, there are those which are neither harmful nor beneficial.[306]

Thence, the Imam again divides into three those sciences that are beneficial: One is the rational and doctrinal sciences; the other is the science of ethics, and the third, the religious sciences.

You should know that the expression 'firm sign' [*ayah muhkamah*] implies the rational sciences and the true doctrines and divine teachings. 'Just duty' [*faradah 'dilah*] implies the science of ethics and self-purification. 'Established *sunnah*' [*sunnah q'imah*] refers to the science of the exoteric aspect and the bodily conduct (i.e. involving some kind of physical activity).[307]

Here the Imam is actually doing an exegesis. Then, in order to prove it he deals with a gnostical point. It is narrated from the *hadith* of the Messenger of God (s) that knowledge consists of the 'firm sign' [*ayah muhkamah*], the 'just duty' [*faradah 'dilah*] and the 'established *sunnah*' [*sunnah q'imah*].

The Imam propounds that what is meant by 'firm sign' [*ayah muhkamah*] are the rational sciences and divine teachings by which issues on the origin, resurrection and prophethood are clarified. What is referred to as 'just duty' [*faradah 'dilah*] is the knowledge that causes the moderation of temperament and disposition. 'Established *sunnah*' [*sunnah q'imah*] is a body of sciences that organizes the individual and social relations of man, the highest form of which is illustriously manifested in devotional precepts.

In a bid to elucidate this exegesis and comparison, the Imam points out existential realms [*s'hat-h'-ye wuj'd*] of man. According to him man has three existential realms, and in his words, three worlds [*nash'ah*]: One is the external and sensory world or realm, and in the mystical sense, the domain of *mulk* [corporeality] and *hud'r* [presence]. The other is the *barzakhi* [limbo] and middle world which is known as the domain of *khiy'* [imagination] and *mith'* [allegory]. The third is the world of reason and the spiritual, celestial and unseen domain.

You should know that... man, to put it briefly, is confronted with three worlds, stations and phases of life: first, the world of the Hereafter, which is the hidden world [*'lam-e ghayb*] of spirituality and the intellect; second, the phase of *barzakh*, which is the world of *khiy'* lying between the other two worlds; third, the phase of this world, the domain of *mulk* [corporeality] and the world of appearance [*'lam-e shah'dat*].[308]

Each of these existential realms is in need of training, nourishment and exaltation. Training of every realm is also in need of knowledge of its own kind. Then, for the training of the realm of reason we are in need of sciences of reasoning and knowledge of certainty. For the training of the realm of allegory of

man we are in need of moral and spiritual training. For the training of corporeal and external realm we are in need of social training, which in turn, is attainable through religious sciences.

In this manner, in order for each of this set of knowledge to become significant and desirable, it should be supplemented and complemented by one of these realms. If in the midst of this we come across knowledge that does not train any of our realms of existence and does not fill any of our existential 'gaps', we should abandon the same knowledge and go in pursuit of other knowledge. All this emphasis on the beneficial knowledge in the *hadīths* is indicative of this truth. The Messenger of God (s) would seek refuge in God from futile knowledge. Describing the attributes of the pious, the Commander of the Faithful (‘a) says that they have lent their ears only to beneficial sciences.[309] All of these emphasize a single truth, and that is, knowledge should set light up the ultra-light of man’s way.

The additional point is that although the Imām lays stress on the useful sciences, he does not view them as confined to particular ones. He believes that attempts should be made as much as possible to categorize each kind of knowledge under any one of the three headings. Therefore, everybody with the understanding that he has about himself and his ‘vacuums’, should know which knowledge is more useful to him, take utmost advantage of the opportunities, and avoid wasting his time.

That is because when a sensible person knows that he cannot acquire all the sciences and achieve all the excellences due to shortness of life, scarcity of time and abundance of obstacles and accidents, he would reflect about the sciences and devote himself to the acquisition of those which are more beneficial for him.[310]

Therefore, the wayfarer [*sālik*] in the pursuit of morality should always yearn for knowledge for his perfection and, on no account long for it for himself. He should always be conscious that this knowledge—though the knowledge of monotheism—does not tie his hands and feet and makes him a captive of terminologies; disentanglement from this kind of knowledge is in itself a virtue and perfection, as it often happens that intense attention to terms and preoccupation with words and that which relates to them make one totally oblivious of the heart and its reform. [As a result] one may acquire complete mastery in expounding the meaning and essence of the heart and the terminology of the metaphysicians [*hukamā’*] and the mystics [*‘urafā’*] while one’s heart, we seek refuge in God from it [*na‘dhubillāh*], is one that is either inverted or sealed, like someone who knows well the beneficial and harmful properties of medicines and is able to describe them with expertise without himself refraining from poisonous medicines or making use of the beneficial ones. Such a person perishes despite all his knowledge of pharmacology, which is unable to rescue him.[311]

Ignorance as a pretext in neglecting knowledge

Although knowledge can sometimes induce man to boast, prevent him from continuing his way to perfection, and become his mental burden, this exceptional condition should never be taken as a pretext that ignorance, therefore, is better than knowledge. In fact, in the parlance of philosophy knowledge is from the category and kind of existence, and existence, from whatever class and rank it may be, is from the lack of what is better and superior.

Abandonment of knowledge under the pretext that it often becomes a veil of man is like avoidance of food with the justification that gluttony or malnutrition is a factor in the ailments of man. In the same manner that treating malnutrition or gluttony is not abstention from food or absolute fasting, but lies in proper eating, similarly, in order to avoid the dangers of knowledge, one should not turn one's back on knowledge. Instead, its blemishes should be identified and be avoided. Hence, those who assert that knowledge is the greatest of veils and, on this pretext, trample on the legacy of the prophets ('a) (that is, knowledge)[312] have adopted a false way.

In this corporeal world which is an arena of conflict of phenomena and every thing is in danger and challenged by other things, knowledge also has its curses that often become man's greatest veil. However, just as we deal with the blemishes of other phenomena, those of knowledge should be dealt with as well and the side effects trimmed off. Therefore, knowledge, to whatever extent it may be, is valuable and, to that same extent, facilitates man's way to perfection, and the sciences—whatever their level, whether they pertain to the *ma'rif* or something else—are a path for reaching the Garden appropriate to each of them, and the wayfarer of each of the paths of knowledge is a traveler on one of the paths of Paradise.[313]

As such, albeit the Imām strongly emphasizes knowledge that is profitable and discourages loading the memory with unnecessary terminologies, he still stresses the instrumental role of knowledge in this manner:

I, too, do not put much of a store by mere knowledge, and a learning that does not bring faith with it is the greatest of veils. However, one has to approach a veil in order to tear it into shreds. The sciences are seeds of (spiritual) experience.[314]

Therefore, anyone who has essentially entered the greatest veil can go out of it. One cannot bypass this channel. Instead, one should enter through one door and exit through another. Not entering and also stopping inside are both incorrect. As a result, through a practical approach to knowledge and insistence on the fact that all “the sciences are absolutely practical and even the transcendental sciences have, in a way, a practical aspect in them,”[315] the Imām urges us initially to deal with the profitable and ennobling kinds of knowledge consciously, selectively and with consideration to the limited opportunity and facilities that we have.

Then, after benefiting from this profitable instrument and reaching the highest heaven by means of this ladder, we should abandon it and continue on our way. We should not become the captives of the luminous and hidden veils that are born of an attachment to knowledge. We ought not to imagine this instrument as the goal, because pursuing knowledge as the objective itself gives one a blackened heart and makes one remain on the way. Thus, the wayfarer on the path to perfection ought not to desire for anything except God, and not preoccupy himself with any attainment and be deceived by it. He should always bear in mind this ultimate objective, and should not quench his thirst except through meeting the Friend.

همچو مستسقى كز آبش سير نست بر هر آنچه يافتى، با؟ مايست

*By God, do not tarry in anything (any spiritual position) that thou hast gained,
(But crave more) like one suffering from dropsy who is never sated with water.[316]*

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