

Conception of Reason in the Qur'an

Heretofore we have discussed briefly the diction of the Qur'an, and said that, for the purpose of communicating its message, the Qur'an makes use of two types of languages, namely, the language of rational argument and the language of feeling. Each of these languages has a specific appeal. The first type addresses and appeals to the intellect or reason, while the second one is meant to appeal to the heart. Now we shall examine the point of view of the Qur'an regarding reason ('aql).

It is to be seen whether or not the Qur'an acknowledges the "authority" (hajjah) of reason --as the scholars of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *usul* put it. This means whether or not we should respect the judgements of reason and act according to them if they happen to be correct and rightly deduced by it. Moreover, if one acts according to the dictates of reason and occasionally falls into error, will God exonerate him for it, or whether He will punish him on account of that error? And, if one fails to act according to the ruling of reason, does he deserve punishment?

Evidence in Favour of the Authority of Reason

The issue of the authority of reason in Islam is certain. Since the earliest times until the present, none amongst the Islamic scholars --except for a very small number-- has ever negated the authority of reason; they have counted it as one of the four sources of Islamic *fiqh*.

1. The Qur'an's Emphasis on Rationalism

Since our discussion is about the Qur'an, I think it necessary to produce arguments concerning the authority of reason from the Qur'an itself. The Qur'an, in various ways, confirms the authority of reason. About sixty to seventy verses can be cited --and that, too, for just one of the various ways, as mentioned-- in which the Qur'an indicates that such and such a matter has been mentioned for reason to reflect on. In one instance, the Qur'an refers to this issue in a striking statement:

إِنَّ شَرَّ الدَّوَابِّ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الصُّمُّ الْبُكْمُ الَّذِينَ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ

Surely the worst of beasts in God's sight are those that are deaf and dumb and do not reason.

(8:22)

Of course, it is obvious that the Qur'an does not mean the physically deaf and dumb, but those who do not want to listen to truth, or those who, when they hear, do not wish to admit it with their tongues. In the view of the Qur'an, the ears which are unable to listen to truth and which are only used for listening to absurd and nonsensical things, are deaf. The tongue which is merely used to utter nonsense is dumb.

The people, who do not reason, are those who do not make use of their intellect and their faculty of thought. Such are not fit to be called human beings. The Qur'an includes them among the beasts. In another verse, while bringing up a subject related to Divine Unity (al-tawhid), the Qur'an refers to the issue of unity of Divine Acts, and says:

وَمَا كَانَ لِنَفْسٍ أَنْ تُؤْمِنَ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ

It is not for any soul to believe, save by the leave of God... (10: 100)

After stating this profound issue --a problem which is not easily comprehensible to every human mind-- the Qur'an continues the verse like this:

وَيَجْعَلُ الرَّجْسَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ

And He lays abomination upon those who do not reason. (10: 100)

In these two verses, which I quote here for the sake of example, the Qur'an, in the terms of logic, invites us to ratiocination. There are many other verses in the Qur'an which, on the basis of consequential signification, can be said to accept the authority of reason. In other words, the Qur'an makes statements which cannot be accepted without accepting the authority of reason. For instance, an opponent is asked to forward rational argument in favour of his position:

قُلْ هَاتُوا بُرْهَانَكُمْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

Say: Bring your proof if you are truthful. (2: 111)

This can only be inferred to mean the Qur'an's ratification of the authority of reason. In another place it uses syllogistic argument to prove the existence of the Necessary Being (wajib al-wujud):

لَوْ كَانَ فِيهِمَا آلِهَةٌ إِلَّا اللَّهُ لَفَسَدَتَا

Were there gods in them [earth and heaven] other than God, they would surely disintegrate ... (21:22)

In these verses the Qur'an has framed a conditional proposition, which exempts or excludes the antecedent premise for arriving at a conclusion which is consequent upon it. Thus the Qur'an aims at emphasizing the role of reason and refutes the view of some of the religions that faith is alien to, or, is incompatible with reason, and that to embrace faith one has to suspend his rational faculty and concentrate upon heart alone, so that it may absorb the Divine light and become illuminated by it. This view is totally negated and refuted by the Qur'an.

2. References to the Law of Causality

The other argument that supports the view that the Qur'an approves of the ultimate authority of reason, is that it defines various problems in terms of cause-and-effect relationship. The cause-and-effect relation-ship, or the law of causation, is the foundation of rational thinking. This law is honoured by the Qur'an and is also employed by it.

The Qur'an speaks on behalf of God, the Almighty, the Creator of the system of cause and effect. Despite the fact that His Word transcends the limitations of causality, the Qur'an is not oblivious of pointing out to the system of causality operating in the universe; it views all phenomena and events as being subservient to this system. The following verse supports this view:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُغَيِّرُ مَا بِقَوْمٍ حَتَّى يُغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنْفُسِهِمْ

God changes not what is in a people, until they change what is in themselves ... (13:11)

The Qur'an intends to say that, although all destinies depend on the Will of God, He never imposes upon human beings such fate as is outside and alien to their determination, will and action. The destinies of societies also change according to their intrinsic system of functioning. God does not extravagantly alter the destiny of a nation without any specific reason, unless they themselves bring about a major change in their system of social and moral values and their manner of performing their individual duties.

The Qur'an urges Muslims to study the conditions and circumstances of societies of the past and to take

lesson from their history. It is evident that if the destinies of races and nations were random, or dependent upon accidents, or were prescribed from above, the advice to study and draw a lesson would not have any sense.

By laying emphasis on it, the Qur'an intends to remind us that a uniform system of laws governs the destinies of all the nations of the world. It also reminds us that if the conditions of a society in which we live, are similar to the conditions prevalent in a society of the past, the same fate awaits us too.

Elsewhere, the Qur'an says:

فَكَأَيِّنْ مِنْ قَرْيَةٍ أَهْلَكْنَاهَا وَهِيَ ظَالِمَةٌ فَهِيَ خَاوِيَةٌ عَلَى عُرُوشِهَا وَيَبْرُؤُا مُعْطَلَةٌ
وَقَصْرٍ مَشِيدٍ أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَتَكُونُ لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ يَعْقِلُونَ بِهَا أَوْ آذَانٌ
يَسْمَعُونَ بِهَا

***How many a city We have destroyed in its evildoing, and now it is fallen down upon its turrets.
How many a ruined well, a tall palace. What, have they not journeyed in the land so that they
have hearts to understand with, or ear to hear with ... ? (22:45-46)***

From this statement, we can infer that the affirmation of the law of causality and the approval of the cause-and-effect relationship, imply the acceptance of authority of reason.

3. Rational Basis of Divine Commands

Another argument which proves that the Qur'an believes in the ultimate authority of reason, is that the Qur'an always explains the rationale behind its commands, laws and precepts. The scholars of *usul al-din* (the principles of the Faith) maintain that the harms and benefits caused by human deeds are among the reasons behind laws and commands. For example, while at one place the Qur'an ordains the performance of prayers, in another place it explains the philosophy of prayer:

إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ تَنْهَى عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ

Indeed prayer forbids indecency and dishonour ... (29:45)

It mentions the spiritual effects of prayer, and states how the prayer can edify man. It explains that it is on account of this exaltation that man can dissociate himself from indecencies. Elsewhere, after laying down rules for observing the fast, the Qur'an explains the rationale for its command:

كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

Prescribed for you is the Fast, even as it was prescribed for those that were before you --haply you will be God-fearing. (2: 183)

Similarly, with respect to other commandments like those regarding zakat (alms) and jihad, the Qur'an clarifies their necessity for individual, as well as for society. In this way, the Qur'an, notwithstanding the transcendental nature of Divine commandments, clarifies fully their worldly and terrestrial relevance, and asks men to cogitate upon their rationale until their meaning becomes explicit, so that it may not be imagined that these laws are based on a series of occult notions beyond the power of human comprehension.

4. Combating Deviations of Reason

Another evidence in favour of the Qur'an's affirmation of the authority of reason --which is more conclusive than that mentioned above-- is the battle it launched against all those agents which obstruct the proper functioning of reason. For clarification of this point, we are forced to mention certain things in the way of an introduction.

The human mind can, in many cases, fall into error. This fact is acknowledged by all of us. However, this danger is not limited to the intellect alone, but can equally befall the senses, and feelings as well. Just for the sense of vision, scores of visual errors and optical illusions have been pointed out. In the case of reason, too, there are times when people frame an argument and rationale and draw an inference on its basis, but later on they realize that the basis of their conclusion was erroneous.

Here the question arises, whether the faculty of reason should be suspended on account of its occasional failures, or whether we should employ other means for discovering the errors of the intellect and seek to avoid such errors. In answering this question, the Sophists said that reason should not be relied upon, and that, basically, argumentation and reasoning is an absurd practice.

Other philosophers have given a fitting reply to the Sophists, and said that though the senses can also err like reason, but no one has ever recommended their suspension. Since it was not possible to discard reason, the philosophers resolved to find ways of making reason secure from error. During their efforts in this regard, they discovered that all arguments consist of two parts, namely, matter and form. Like a building which has various ingredients in its construction, like, lime, cement, steel, etc. (matter), to acquire a specific structure (form).

In order to attain the permanence and perfection of its construction, it is essential to procure proper material as well as to draw a perfect and faultless plan. For the correctness and accuracy of an argument, too, it is essential that its content and form be both free of error and defect. For judging the

validity of the form of any argument, the Aristotelian or formal logic came into existence. The function of formal logic is to determine the accuracy or inaccuracy of the form of an argument, and help the mind to avoid errors in the process of reasoning.

But the major problem that remains is that solely formal logic is inadequate for this purpose, because it cannot alone guarantee the validity of an argument. It can give assurance about one aspect alone. To obtain the perfection of the material aspect, the use of material logic is also essential, that is, we need certain criteria for controlling the quality of the rational material.

Thinkers like Bacon and Descartes strove hard to evolve some kind of material logic similar to the formal logic of Aristotle, which was devised for formal reasoning. They did obtain certain criteria in this regard, though they are not as universal as those of Aristotelian logic, but are, to a limited extent, helpful in preventing the mind from committing errors in reasoning. Some may be surprised to know that the Qur'an has presented such principles for the prevention of any lapses in the process of reasoning, which surpass in merit and precedence the efforts of philosophers like Descartes and others.

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