

Chapter 4: Tools of Knowledge 2

“The starry heaven above me and the moral law within me”. I. Kant

Self Purification

When one hears about purification, one initially thinks of water or air purification for example. Therefore you may wonder what self-purification is all about. How are we supposed to purify ourselves? How does self-purification gain knowledge for us?

Definition

As we mentioned in the previous chapter, the human mind is like a mirror, which, by reflecting objects, creates knowledge about them for us. Despite differences between the mind and mirrors, there are some similarities as well.

One such similarity is that external and internal obstacles can affect the accuracy and power of reflection of both of them. For example the dustier a mirror, the less reflective it will be. Similarly, obstacles can affect the human mind, whether totally or partially. Prejudice is considered one of the obstacles of the mind in seeing the truth.

Rumi, in the First Book of Mathnawi, gives an allegorical example of self-purification. He narrates of a competition between Chinese and Romans to create a painting masterpiece. Two houses opposite to each other were given to each of them to paint. The Chinese painters gave a big list of the materials they needed for such a project to the king and finally created a magnificent painting.

Surprisingly, however, the Romans did not ask for any materials. All they did was to polish the house as much as they could. On the day of the exhibition, each group unveiled their masterpiece. Amazingly, whatever design could be seen in the Chinese house, the same, even brighter, could be observed in the Romans' as well.

From this allegorical example, Rumi concludes that the real house is the human heart and the Romans are those who purify themselves.

Self-purification therefore means the removal of all various types of dust and rust as obstructive elements in the search for truth.

The supporters of this tool regard it as the highest tool of knowledge without which all sensory and rational perceptions are in vain. They believe at least certain types of knowledge will be gained solely by the means of self purification. "Clear your mind and soul and the knowledge of the truth is there," they say.

Examples of many who changed their lifestyle and to a certain extent gained that knowledge are John Milton and his dream, Fodhail Ibn 'Ayadh, and Zaid Ibn Harethe.

The Spectrum of Self Purification

Although the primary levels of self purification are necessary to obtain all types of knowledge the main spectrum of self purification as it is meant in this context is in three realms:

1) Intuition

Intuition is a form of knowledge or cognitive independent of experience or reason. Intuitiveness is therefore generally regarded as instinctive knowledge that we are born with. The mathematical idea of an axiom (a self evident proposition) as discussed in the previous chapter as well as previously mentioned humane instincts are the best example of intuitive knowledge.

From the ancient Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras to Spinoza, Kant to Henri Bergson, intuition has always been regarded as the higher form of knowledge. Bergson (1859–1941) the French philosopher and Nobel laureate, considered intuition as the major source of morality and religion in *"The two sources of Morality and Religion"*. He also considered intuition the only means of knowledge.

Believing in God is a humane, instinctive and intuitive of knowledge. This instinctive knowledge is however, sometimes overshadowed by obstacles. Particular incidences of life can stimulate the mind and bring this instinct to the conscious as did indeed happen to Pascal. At the age of 31, just 8 years before his death, he was driving a four in hand carriage the horses ran away.

The two horses at the front, dashed over the parapet of the bridge at Neuilly and Pascal was saved only by the traces breaking. He considered this a special summons to abandon the world. He wrote an account of the accident on a small piece of parchment, which he wore next to his heart, for the rest of his life, to perpetually remind him of this covenant. This accident turned the currents of his thoughts to a religious life.

In order for you to have a clear understanding of your instinctive knowledge, I need to take you on a short tour from the world of physical objects around you through to the kingdom of animals to finally embark on the issue of human instinct.

a. The Natural World:

In the world around us there are numerous physical and chemical objects. Scientists distinguish them from each other by their physical and chemical properties. For instance, the chemical properties of Hydrogen gas are that it is highly flammable whereas the chemical property of water is that under standard atmospheric pressure, its freezing point is 0° C (32° F) and its boiling point is 100° C (212° F). This characteristic is essential to all water or Hydrogen gas in the world. In other words, it is in the nature of water, any water, to boil at 100° C.

b. The Kingdom of Animals:

Instinct in zoology and in the kingdom of animals is an unlearned pattern of behaviour, enabling members of a species to respond approximately the same to a wide range of situations in the natural world. Examples of such are feeding, mating and parenting. Instinctive behaviour can be extremely complex even in relatively simple animals.

The remarkable navigational and communication skills possessed by honeybees are such an example. A worker bee may fly a quarter of a mile or more from the hive in search of flowers that are a good source for food. The sun usually serves as an indicator of direction, but the bee can navigate accurately, even in a moderate breeze, when the sun is hidden by a cloud.

When it finds a good source of food, the bee has the capacity to calculate an accurate course back to the hive, allowing for wind and apparent movement of the sun. Upon returning to the hive, it communicates the location of the food through a 'dance' that conveys information about distance and direction. All these complex behaviours occur without the necessity of learning. This process of 'trial and error' is called instinctive behaviour of honeybees.

c. Human beings

Human beings have some instinctive patterns of behaviour in common with animals such as mating, feeding and parenting. There is, however, another type of instinct, which is beyond the scope of the animal kingdom. I will call it *humane instinct*. Humane instinct is similar to that of animal instinct except that unlike animal instinct, humane instinct is that found as part of human nature, that is humans find it naturally within themselves.

Types of Humane Instinct

Without limiting humane instinct to just the following examples, I would however, like to highlight the most acknowledged ones.

Example 1: Knowledge Lovers

The desire to learn and increase one's knowledge is instinctive in humans. This instinctive behaviour is apparent from infancy. As the baby grows up, his/her craving new discoveries increases to the extent that the baby becomes as curious as a scientist.

This increased awareness and curiosity stimulates the desire to learn, which can sometimes become intolerable to the parent when the child continuously bombards him/her with innumerable questions. This desire is, in cognitive psychology, known as 'the sense of research'.

Abu Rayhan Birooni, the famous Iranian mathematician in the 10th and 11th century AD, was visited in the last hours of his life by one of his jurist friends. As soon as Birooni saw his friend he asked him a jurisprudential question although he was lying on his sick bed.

The jurist was astonished at this type of questioning, however replied: "You are too ill my friend for scientific discussions, are you sure you want me to answer you?"

With a weak voice, Birooni continued: "Yes my dear friend. Is it not better to know the answer to this issue and then die?" The jurist answered the question and farewell his friend. Having only taken a few steps from Birooni's house, the jurist heard the cries of mourning relatives thus realising that a man so thirsty for knowledge had died.

Another narration highlighting this thirst for knowledge tells us of Pascal who was so preoccupied with his mathematical calculations and the formation of the relativity that he missed his wedding night.

Example 2: Virtue Lovers

The second humane instinct is one of moral and virtuous values. Kant was filled with wonder and awe at this instinct as can be seen in his saying: "*the starry heaven above me and the moral law within me*". Man by nature loves discipline, social cooperation, justice and so forth. Consider the following phrase: "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you".

These words of wisdom are universally mentioned in all major religions of the world. Such statements are needless of any experience of reason to be accepted. They, like 'the total is bigger than all of its parts', are indeed self evident.

Some ethical philosophers, one of whom is Spinoza, have expressed a sense of moral values, at least as far as fundamental ethical codes are concerned, as intuitive and immediate, hence are universally accepted.

Example 3: Beauty Lovers

Man, by nature, loves beauty. This can be observed by the way a person dresses. Although the primary

function of clothing is protection, beautification also plays a major role in its presentation. When you look at a masterpiece of a natural landscape, your eyes naturally celebrate and your mind flourishes. Art is the product of this humane instinct.

Example 4: Love Lovers

Perhaps the greatest and the most transcendental of human instincts is the sense of love. Man by nature needs to love something and be loved by others. This natural desire can appear in different stages of life, in various ways and situations.

First exposure to this desire for love begins with a platonic love relationship between mother and child, continues at some stages of life in a romantic fashion but doesn't last until the lover discovers the real Beloved One, who is eternal and cannot be missed.

The instinct of love is the same in all stages of life, although it appears in different formats. In other words, when one looks at a magnificent landscape painting and enjoy the view, when you love your partner to the extent that you tell him/her 'I adore you', you are in fact instinctively in search of love of the real Beloved One as can be assumed the lost is on is found.

Ibn Al-Arabi (1165–1240), the greatest of Muslim mystics, nicely expressed this feeling by saying: “No one ever loves any one save the Creator; but He is sometimes hidden under the mask of Zaynab, Su'ad and Hind (female names in Arabic).”

2) Inspiration

Another spectrum of self purification is inspiration. Inspiration literally means 'the drawing of air into the lungs as part of the breathing process which is required to promote life'. Thus, when a person is inspired it is assumed that he has received a heavenly gift to revive others.

Levels of inspiration include:

- Creativity
- Sparking of a sudden brilliant idea
- Wisdom inspiration
- Prophecy by a divine guidance and influence on human beings.

3) Revelation

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first or primary meaning of the term '*revelation*' is:

'The disclosure or communication of knowledge to man by a divine or supernatural agency.'

It is derived from the Latin word 'revelation' meaning uncovered or laying bare.

Revelation in its precise meaning may be defined as '*a divine, infallible communication (of propositional truths) to selected humans know as "Messengers" who observe the Truth in its unaltered form and to share it with the people or their time, exactly as it was revealed to them.*'

The reality of revelation is beyond the scope of ordinary human comprehension, as they have never experienced it. Thus, divine revelation has always been and still is, one of the most fundamental of all theological questions and debates. Let us therefore look further to gain insight in to some of the issues of Revelation.

The Spectrum of Revelation

· *Revelation through creation.* The spectrum of revelation begins with the revelation through creation. The design and artistry within creation speak clearly of the Designer and Artist who brought it about.

· *Revelation through Moral Consciousness.* This humane instinct of moral consciousness is in fact a spectrum of revelation to mankind.

· *Revelation through wisdom.* Wisdom can be placed within the spectrum of revelation, because, like conscience, it bears testimony to the moral constitution of society. By wisdom here I mean human wisdom words that when read one naturally agrees with the sense behind it and that the speaker must be inspired. For instance, consider the following human words of wisdom:

"Hate is like acid. It can damage the vessel in which it is stored, as well as destroy the object on which it is poured."

"The road to success is always under construction"

· *Revelation through true dream and vision.* Another spectrum of revelation is an experience of true dreams and visions, which some experience at some stages of their life. This is again an issue of personal experience. We see things in dreams have not yet occurred in reality. However these events will happen in due course as seen in the dream.

Similarly, you may dream of something happening to a person living elsewhere in the world, only later to discover that the incident actually took place at the same time of your dream. I personally have had such an experience. Once I dreamed that my teacher died, while I was in Italy thousands of miles away, and not even aware he had even a health problem.

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