A Critique of Intellect

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Part 2 references more than 15 Quranic verses stressing the importance of intellect to:

- understand God's message [Ayaat],
- follow the way of Muhammad [S],
- counter Satan's arguments,
- avoid the hellfire, and to
- distinguish oneself from the animals.

Before we get to the critique of reason, let us briefly diverge into the past to appreciate the effects of reason-based policies, despite the divergence of despotic rulers from the original message.

"Islamic Empire" and the Renaissance of Europe

The initial policies of the Islamic empire were supportive of reason-based thinking. Therefore, scientific learning and scholarship flourished throughout the empire. The conducive environment produced thousands of polymaths (scientists and scholars) during the first few hundred years.

A small list of Muslim mathematicians, astronomers, biologists, chemists, psychologists, economists, geographers, and philosophers, who were at the top of their fields in the entire world of their time, can be found on the Internet.

Al-gebra and al-gorithm are two of the most common phrases in mathematical and computer sciences, which bear the name of Muslim scientists born a thousand years ago — Geber (*Jabir Bin Hayyan* جابر بن حيّان) died in 816 A.D. and Algorithmi (*Al-Khwarizmi* الخوارزمى) died in 850 A.D., respectively. Whenever you see 'al' at the beginning of a scientific or scholarly term, chances are that it is a twisted form of an Arabic word. Hazen (*Ibn al-Haytham* ابن الهيثم), Alberonius (*Al-Bairuni* البيرونى) and Avicenna (*Ibn-Sina* ابن سينا) were among the intellectuals whose works have survived to date, to some degree.

Although most of the original work from that era has been lost to history, it served as a steppingstone for the European Renaissance scholars and scientists. To build the scientific foundation, Europe was already translating and studying the writings of Muslim scholars by the end of the 11th century.

Muhammad Iqbal's Poetry

While Muslim intellectuals were the giants for the pre-Renaissance European scholars, Muslims themselves were gradually doing away with intellectual endeavors. With time, Muslims started disowning and

losing their scientific heritage. They forgot all about their intellectual treasure. No wonder, Muslim decline soon followed.

Iqbal (an Indian subcontinent poet who died in 1938) described this dire situation in his poetry (بانگ درا) as follows:

لے گئے تثلیث کے فرزند میراثِ خلیل خشتِ بنیادِ کلیسا بن گئی خاکِ حجاز

Europe took away the (intellectual) heritage of Muslims And (from it,) built the foundation of European empire

واے ناکامی متاعِ کارواں جاتا رہا کارواں کے دل سے احساس زیاں جاتا رہا

How disappointing! Our prized (scientific) heritage is lost Worse, even the sense of this loss is now lost (among the Muslims)!

Al-Ghazali — The Intellect Slayer

It is said that after Al-Ghazali [1058 – 1111 A.D.] criticized the scientific approach in his landmark book, *'Tahafat-ul-Filasafa'* [تہافت الفلاسفة] — 'The Incoherence of the Scientists', the spirit of scientific inquiry died in the Muslim lands. (Recall why scientists and scientific methods are being challenged by faith-based organizations and individuals in the U.S.A. today.)

Imam Ghazali [امام غزالی] begins his book with the allegations against Muslim scientists as follows:

"I have observed that there is a class of people who believe in… intelligence and insight. They have abandoned all religious rituals.. and defy the injunctions of Shariah (ritualistic laws)… for they were born into an un-Islamic atmosphere and their parents were not any better …"

Imam Ghazali continues …

"[they believe] that the mathematical, logical, physical and metaphysical sciences … are the most profound; that their excellent intelligence justifies their bold attempts to discover the Hidden Things (laws of nature via causes-and-effects); and that with … their intelligence and … accomplishments, **they reject the authority of shariah laws … and believe that all such things are only sacred lies** (lies in the name of sacred people) and (thus) nonsense. … They refused to be content with the religion followed by their ancestors …" (*Ghazali*)

If the above quoted statements ring a bell, it is not a surprise. Recall 'The Country of The Blind'. These are the same allegations that religious scholars use against those who prefer reason to blind faith.

Imam Ghazali deals with many issues in the book, but I will go with the most fundamental topic in natural sciences that Imam Ghazali attacked: the law of cause-and-effect, which is the basis for all natural sciences.

Note: There was no separation of, or distinction between scientists and philosophers in older times. There was no separate word for a scientist; they were called philosophers. You can safely replace the word 'philosopher' with 'scientist-philosopher' when you read an older book.

The Cause-and-Effect

It was well-established among Muslim scientists that things do not depart from their natural course. If there is a cause, the effect will follow. Everything in this world follows this principle. To refute this claim, Imam Ghazali writes:

> "The connection between the cause and the effect is not necessary … Take for instance any two things … burning and contact with fire; light and the rise of the Sun; death and the severance of the head from the trunk (none is due to cause and effect.) …"
>
> "[Scientists] claim that fire is an agent of burning and whenever there is fire, it cannot stop from doing what is in its nature to do (i.e., burn) after it comes into contact with a subject."

Imam Ghazali further explains that when you show fire to cotton, cotton turns black and disintegrates. But how can [science] claim that fire burned it? Fire does not burn the cotton; it is God who turns the cotton black and disintegrates it. God does this either by Himself or through His angels. Fire is an inanimate thing; it has no power (of its own) to burn other things. [Scientists] only see the fire coming closer to the cotton and then cotton turning black, but it is God (and not the fire) who (burns and) turns cotton black.

The argument presented here is a good argument, but I do not know how it can be twisted to deduce what has been claimed in the preface of his book? Imam Ghazali gives his own reasons.

For Imam Ghazali, there are no Hidden Secrets of nature (natural laws). It is always God Who is active in His World. He does whatever He Wills! He acts according to His Wishes. Since He wishes that cotton must burn whenever fire comes closer, He turns the cotton black.

In other words, believers in cause-and-effect start believing that fire has an inherent power to burn cotton; and thus, God is not needed. This is a violation of Islamic theology according to Imam Ghazali and all subsequent Muslim scholars.

Where Did Imam Ghazali Fail?

Imam Ghazali wanted to keep the door for miracles open, but he forgot that the Quran offers a reason-based message.

> One subtle but important point that Imam Ghazali and all theologians fail to note is that the natural law of cause-and-effect and God's Will are not two mutually exclusive concepts. God must have used His free Will to enforce natural laws on the world.

God could have Willed otherwise by giving things the capability to modify their own properties at will, such as by allowing fire not to burn. But none in the universe, except humans, has been granted the gift of free will.

On the other hand, a plan that requires interference, such as in the case of an impromptu requirement to change the fire's behavior to burn, is an imperfe