

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

How do Humans Learn?

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“He who knows his own soul, knows his Sustainer”, Prophet Muhammad

Man is alone in creation in that he asks questions and he wants to know. He asks: Who am I? Who is my Creator? How am I related to the world? Why am I here? His thirst for knowledge is unquenchable. When one question is answered he asks another question until his quest leads him to the very doorsteps of heaven.

Knowledge is like a mighty river. Into this river flow thousands of streams swelling up its currents. But the flow does not stop until it is consumed in the vast expanse of the ocean. Knowledge has similar attributes. It does not stop until it finds the Truth.

This propensity towards knowledge separates man from the beast. Animals do not ask questions. They do not gather facts and information and sift through them to build the tree of knowledge.

Man is well endowed to pursue knowledge. He is gifted with the senses, which interact with the world and provide him with data about the nature of things. He uses that data to build theories about the behavior of the cosmos. He is endowed with reason, which he uses to ponder the possibility of things. And he is endowed with a *Nafs* (soul) which is the seat of knowledge.

Man is thus a knower. “I am conscious; therefore I am” is the succinct way in which philosophers have expressed this attribute. That man is a conscious being is well understood and universally acknowledged. However, there are important differences in which consciousness and knowledge are perceived in the secular tradition and in the spiritual framework.

In the secular tradition, knowledge is based on reason supported by empirical data. To quote Hegel, “Reason is the True, the Eternal, the Absolute Power and that it and nothing but it, its glory and majesty, manifests itself in the world – this, as we said before, has been proved in philosophy and is being presupposed here as proved.” (Hegel, *Reason as the Basis of History*, translated by R. S. Hartman, The Liberal Arts Press, 1953).

The secular tradition does not recognize the imperative of revelation for knowledge and consciousness. Furthermore, the soul as the agent of cognition and knowledge is absent from its world-view. The consequence of these assumptions, as we shall show, is fragmentation of knowledge and alienation of man from his own self.

In the spiritual approach, by contrast, there is Unity of Knowledge. God is the First Source. The knowledge possessed by man is bestowed by the Creator. Man has been taught the “names” of all things. But man forgets and must rediscover what he has forgotten, through observation, reason, intuition and infusion. Thus the spiritual path offers a logical, coherent theory of knowledge.

Modern man demands proofs for all assertions. He demands that belief be consistent with observation and experience. In what follows, we will present a logical, coherent theory of knowledge based on the Qur’an which stands the test of reason and empirical observation. We will also show how the secular approach falls apart in its world-view and in its view of the condition of man.

Physical Understanding is based on Relationships

Relationships form the basis of our knowledge of the world. A physicist, for instance, addresses himself to the relationship between objects, their size, shape, mass, energy and their behavior when subjected to change. A sociologist examines the way people relate to each other and how these relationships undergo transformation. A historian studies the rise and fall of civilizations and the forces that influence them. A mathematician is concerned with understanding the basic relationships between real and abstract entities. A biophysicist is interested in how the RNA transmits information from one generation to the next. A physician ponders the relationship of disease to its symptoms, its mode of transmission and determines the methods for its containment. And so on.

Relationships are fundamental to understanding. In their absence, no cognition and no understanding is possible. This fact, obvious as it is, is often overlooked. As a consequence, language that expresses relationships is often construed to express the absolute quality of things in themselves.

Some examples are in order. Our ideas of the physical world are expressed in terms of space, time, mass, gravity, energy and so on. These quantities are the alphabets of the language of physics. They are the building blocks from which we derive our world-view.

Consider a page of this book. It has a certain set of dimensions, say, six inches by eight inches. When we say the width of a page is six inches, we are stating the relationship of the width of a page to a standard of length, in this case an inch. We express the size of other objects in similar language. Thus a tree is twenty feet tall, a road is fifty feet wide, a brick is two inches thick and so on. In each case, the relationship of a dimension of an object to a standard is expressed.

Distance is what gives the environment its spatial characteristics. Space is a quantity all men and women identify with. Everyone understands the meaning of a statement such as, Los Angeles is three thousand miles from New York. Or, a house has an area of two thousand square feet. The easily identifiable notions of distance, area and volume are built on an accepted standard of length.

Similar is the case with our notion of time. Time is a mystery and a challenge to our inquisitive minds. Here, we are concerned only with the language in which it is expressed. A man may say he is forty years old. He is expressing his age in relation to the time the earth takes to revolve around the sun. He might

have said, with equal validity, that he is 480 months old. Each expression relates his life span to an accepted standard. We accept such standards as our points of reference, often forgetting that they are there.

Consider what happens when such standards do not exist or we temporarily lose sight of them. As an illustration, consider a pilot who is flying over the Pacific Ocean on a dark night when there are high clouds. As is routine we would expect our pilot to have chartered his course carefully with reference to ground stations and with reference to the earth's magnetic field and stellar bodies such as the stars. Suppose, while the aircraft is flying over the ocean under a cloud cover, all instrumentation on board fails due to some misfortune. Radio links with ground stations and with other aircraft are cut off. Compasses fail. The inertial navigation equipment does not work. The pilot will lose his sense of direction. To him, North, South, East and West will be the same. He is as likely to head towards the North pole as towards the South pole. Distance and direction will cease to have any meaning. All he can say is, "I am flying".

Our pilot in the hypothetical situation has no standard, no guidepost, with which to describe his bearing. It is the same with our notions of weight, force, time and energy. We express them as quantities that state the relationship between a common characteristic, a property of similar physical entities. We use these definitions to build an enormously intricate pattern of physical relationships. Take these standards away and our intricate pattern will collapse like a house of cards. For instance, in the absence of a standard of time, a man cannot say, "I am forty years old". All he can say is, "I am old". Like the pilot who floats in space unbiased with respect to direction, our notions about the world "float". We can sense and feel but we cannot express this feeling in quantitative terms.

What is true of physical relations is also true of social relationships. If you ask a person who he is, he may answer along the following lines: "My name is Joe, son of John, father of Jim, born in San Francisco in 1950, height 5 feet 10 inches, weight 175 pounds, complexion such and such". If you examine this statement, you will see that each item therein is an attribute which defines his *relationship* to a person, a place, a measure of weight, length, color and so on. But who *is* he? Nowhere in his answer has he given us the slightest idea of who he really is. In the absence of relationships it should be impossible for him to tell us anything about his self. He would "float" in time and space in the same sense that the airplane pilot floats.

Relationships are therefore central to man's understanding of the world around him. The physical world is an edifice built of physical relationships. The social world is an edifice built of relationships between people. A philosopher sorts out these relationships and tries to make some sense out of them. He observes, collects data, arranges it, builds general models upon it and through extrapolation and extension makes predictions about the outcome of similar situations. Relationships are as if they are "signs" to the knowledge that man possesses. They teach us something about the physical attributes of people, places and things. But the "thing in itself" is hidden from us.

Herein is the riddle. The enormously complex world-view that we developed says nothing about the "thing in itself". Yet, we walk around thinking that we "know" the world. Science and scientific language fail us when we try to understand the essence of things. *We know the world only through its attributes. Its essence is only felt. It cannot be expressed.*

The helplessness in knowing the "thing in itself" is even more pronounced when we speak of God. Language fails us when we try to describe God because there is no relationship and no yardstick with which to describe Him. All we can say is: "God is". The world that we know becomes a simile and our description of Him becomes the incantation "*Hu Allah Hu....*" (*God is He*). Indeed, this incantation

occupies an important place in Sufi practice. Notice the symmetry in this incantation. The words are elliptic. They fold upon themselves. The end 'Hu' is the same as the beginning 'Hu'. This simile can be written as a circle so that the beginning is the same as the end. The incantation has no qualifications. The absence of qualification means that God is beyond all relationships. The words float. They are absolute. The Sufi who recites this incantation seeks to free himself /herself of all relational notions when he/she remembers God. Once he/she realizes this freedom through remembrance of the Name of God, he/she aspires to a higher consciousness.

Knowledge is acquired through Observation, Reason, Creativity and Infusion

In this section we will identify four methods of acquiring knowledge and examine the process associated with each one. In a later section, we will present a unified approach to knowledge from a spiritual perspective.

Observation is the basis for scientific knowledge

Empirical knowledge is acquired through observation and measurement. It is the language of science. A physicist gathers data about the physical nature of things and their properties. An astronomer studies the motion of stellar bodies and catalogues their orbits. A social scientist observes the culture of people, how they relate to each other and searches for the underlying causes of their behavior. A historian searches for patterns in the rise and fall of civilizations. A doctor depends on clinical observations for the diagnosis of diseases. And so on.

Sometimes the amount of data that is available is scant as it is when a comet visits the solar system. Often, the amount of data is enormous as it is when we study the food habits of people. This enormous amount of data is codified, plotted and is looked at from different angles. Interdependent as the world is, any observation is dependent on a large number of variables. A scientist, in order to make some sense of the data available to him, makes simplifications, assumes that certain variables are fixed or limits the sample that he examines. Mathematical tools are then used to construct a general model so that the influence of a specific variable may be better understood.

It is not only the scientists who simplify data. Non-scientists do it as well. Indeed, it is an attribute of humans that they wish to *understand* the universe.

Two characteristics of the empirical world, obvious as they are, must be stated. First, that all men and women have access to empirical data. Second, that the senses play a central role in the acquisition of this data.

Empirical data, or observation, is the privilege of all men and women. We can all see, hear, touch, taste and feel. These attributes are a part of our common humanity. All of us can see the moon and the stars. We hear the song of the birds and the sound of thunder. We can feel hot and cold and we can taste bitter and sweet. We suffer pain when a needle pierces our fingers and we experience pleasure when we eat good and wholesome food.

The senses are the common tools with which we interact with the world and learn about it. Humankind is gifted and it makes additional tools, which act as an extension of the senses. Our eyes are weak. So we build telescopes, earthbound and space based, that pierce the far reaches of galaxies in different wavelengths. We can tolerate only a narrow range of heat and cold. So we make temperature gauges that

measure temperatures as high as that of molten steel or as cold as liquid helium. Our ears can hear sounds only in a narrow spectrum. So we make instruments that can “hear” from radio waves to atomic blasts.

The senses also enable us to participate in the drama of life. Without such participation life loses all meaning. Participation in life and the joy of the senses is a natural right bestowed upon all men and women, to be enjoyed in balance and proportion. The spiritual path shown by the Qur’an emphasizes again and again this natural right:

*“Have we not bestowed upon thee a pair of eyes and a tongue?”
The Qur’an (90:8-9)*

*“Eat of the wholesome things that We have provided you; but waste not, because God does not love those who waste”.
The Qur’an (6:141)*

*“In the creation of the heavens and the earth there are Signs for those who reflect and think”.
The Qur’an (2:164)*

The senses are like windows to the outside world. Close the windows and all we have is darkness inside. Such is the condition of the man who lives in “darkness upon darkness”. It is the condition of a person in ultimate terror. In the empirical framework all that the mind knows is experienced through the senses. A person who has lost the use of his senses, one who has no sight, no hearing, no sensation of touch, taste or feeling, cannot gain consciousness of anything and cannot learn.

The senses have limitations and there is a deep mystery about them

The human senses are limited. Consider the sense of hearing. It is perhaps the best understood of all of our senses because the ear is the most accessible and the most “mechanical” of our organs. We have developed countless musical instruments to amplify, modulate, manipulate and generate sound waves. The human ear responds to sound in the range of 20 to 20,000 cycles per second. The range of its intensity is only 2 to 120 decibels. This range decreases with age. Even at the same age different people have different hearing capabilities. It is therefore trite to say that man’s faculty for hearing is limited. Many animals and birds have a far superior ability to hear. Dolphins hear under water. Bats generate and hear sounds at frequencies far beyond the range of human capability and use this ability to avoid obstacles when they fly at night. Furthermore, the human ear cannot discriminate between sounds beyond a certain intensity. For instance, a sound of 150 decibels is “heard” not as sound but as pain.

The situation is the same with the senses of smell, taste and touch. Man’s sense of smell is highly subjective. No two individuals have the same sense of smell. Many animals have a more developed sense of smell than humans. A hunting dog can smell a rabbit for miles. A cougar can follow a deer trail over long distances. Lions use their odor to establish boundaries of authority. Ants use their sense of smell to create trails over extremely rough terrain.

Consider the sense of touch. Our ability to withstand variations in temperature is limited. If the temperature exceeds 100 degrees Fahrenheit we feel hot. If it drops to zero we freeze. Indeed, our sense of touch is blind to extreme temperatures. Thus a sensation of frostbite is the same as the sensation of a sunburn. Both hurt. If we touch something extremely cold we perceive it as hot.

So the human is a finite creature. His senses are extremely limited. In comparison with him, a cheetah is more nimble, a snake more sensitive, a vulture keener, a bat more astute, an ant more determined. Man overcomes these limitations to a certain extent through the invention of instruments. Instrumentation is an extension of man's senses. Man has built "eyes" that see far into the heavens or gaze into the secrets of the smallest particles. He has built ears that can hear sounds beyond the reach of any beast. He has developed sensors that can touch objects hotter than molten steel. But these instruments, no matter how sophisticated they are, no matter how fine their sensitivity, no matter how great their resolution, must still be "read" before they have any meaning. Consequently, they are also subject to the limitations of the human senses.

Not only are man's senses limited, they are also deceptive. The information that they transmit is distorted. Consider the rise of the moon. Early in the evening, on the horizon, the full moon appears as a brilliant huge globe much larger in size than the sun is at mid-day. Yet no sensible man would say that the moon is larger than the sun. As the night progresses the moon seems to contract in size as it traverses the sky. But photographs taken of the moon during its journey through the heavens show no change in its size from early evening till the dawn. Quite obviously the apparent size of the moon offers no clue to its real size. Similar is the case with geometrical shapes. A vertical line drawn on a piece of paper appears longer than a horizontal line of the same length. A triangle appears larger than a circle of the same area. A white circle against a black background appears larger than a black circle of the same radius against a white background. These examples confirm that man's senses are deceptive. They are poor guides in the process of learning the true nature of things.

Where does the mystery of the senses come in? If we ask a person how he sees, he is likely to point to his eyes. If we ask him how he tastes, he points to his tongue. If we ask him how he hears, he points to his ears. It may come as a surprise to many that the sense of sight is *not* in the eye, the sense of taste is *not* in the tongue and the sense of hearing is *not* in the ear.

Consider a beautiful yellow rose. If you ask a physicist, he may state that electromagnetic waves from the sun hit the rose. The petals of the rose absorb all wavelengths except a wavelength of about 0.6 micrometers. Wavelengths around 0.6 micrometers are reflected by the rose, travel through the air and enter the eye where they register on the optic nerve. The optic nerve sends an electrical signal to the brain where it registers its color.

In this "scientific" description, the sun is there, wavelengths are there, absorption and reflection are there, the optic nerve and brain cells are there. But where is the color yellow? Is it in the sun or the eye? We will immediately recognize that it is neither in the sun nor in the eye nor even in the rose. The rose merely reflects waves of light. The sun merely radiates the light. The eye merely receives and registers the light waves. Each of them participates in the process of recognition. But none of them determines the color yellow.

The answer quite simply is that the sensation of color is an attribute of the soul. We cannot find the yellow color out there in the physical world because the soul is not "out there". The moment of recognition is an intuitive moment bestowed upon the soul. The senses are like "windows" to the soul so that the soul can see a moment of light.

Natural science does not answer questions of color and feelings. It merely alludes to them. In the world of natural science there is no color, no pain, no happiness, no joy, no suffering. It is a cold, empty world, totally devoid of human qualities. In it the rainbow does not exist, only the dispersion of light. In it, love does not exist, only changes in body chemistry. In it tears do not exist, only droplets falling from the eye.

The "scientific" approach cannot describe feelings. But we know they are there. A rose has color because we see it. We laugh because we are happy. We cry because we feel pain. The qualities attached to sight, touch, sound and taste are not a part of the body. They cannot be described using the methods of secular science.

The moment of experience is an intuitive moment. It is indeed a gift bestowed by the Creator upon the soul. *The senses are attributes of the soul.* They are bestowed so that we may experience this most illuminating of fireworks we call life. The analogy of the senses to the soul is that of windows to a building. The windows are an attribute of the building. Without them the building gets no light. And without light there is total darkness inside and it is impossible to know what is in the building. In the words of the *Qur'an*, "...Have we not given you a pair of eyes.... (90:8).

Knowledge and Reason

Reason is the faculty that admits of the *possibility* of things. It is the attribute that facilitates the extension of knowledge beyond the realm of immediate experience. It is the faculty that admits that man has an existential self.

Let us consider some examples. If we know it takes one gallon of gas to drive twenty miles, reason tells us that it takes two gallons to drive forty miles. If we know the angular velocity of the earth's rotation we can predict the velocity at which a satellite has to move so that it is stationary over a certain point on earth in geosynchronous orbit at an altitude of approximately 25,000 miles. Such a satellite is used for television and radio transmissions. In these examples it is the faculty of reason that has enabled us to predict unknown events on the basis of known experience.

The ability to admit of the possibility of things is a distinguishing characteristic of humans. It is this faculty that has enabled man to liberate himself from the heavy chains of his earthbound existence and to soar to the heavens. It has facilitated the conception of abstract relationships and their modifications so that we can learn from them. It is reason that has conceived of the possibility that in its passage from positive to negative, from point to counterpoint, there is a moment of suspension, of nothingness, of *zero*. Reason has made the projection that a series of numbers forced in a geometric progression leads to *infinity*. Most importantly, it has conceived of the *possibility* of the soul, of an eternal life, of heaven.

Reason is the basis for mathematics, the cement for science. It is the foundation for logic and the soul of philosophy. Humans look for a *reason* for everything. They look for a reason for the way things are and a reason for the way people behave. They even want to know the *reason* for existence. It is a universal attribute that is uniquely human regardless of nationality or origin.

As noble a faculty as reason is, it must seek its validation with empirical data. In the absence of observed data, reason becomes speculative. Correct observation and sound judgment must always arrest the inclination of reason towards speculative thought.

Perhaps no other civilization reached such heights in rational thinking as did the Greek civilization. In the ninth and tenth centuries, Greek rational thought went through further nourishment in the Islamic world and it reached the Latin West in the twelfth century through Spain and Sicily. The achievements as well as the pitfalls of Western thought have their origin in Greek thought. In this century the rational approach, which originated in Greece and traveled through the Middle East and Western Europe, has become global.

Reason is the sovereign that rules over the world of mind and matter. But if reason were the limit of man's reach, man would know nothing of those intangibles that distinguish him from the beast. If we are mere rational creatures, would we know anything of love? What is the *reason* to love? If reason were the limit of man's reach, would we necessarily hate? What is the *reason* to hate? What is the *reason* to laugh, to cry, to give, to struggle, to conquer a mountain, to soar above the clouds? The answer quite simply is there is no reason. There is no reason why men and women must love, hate, sing, laugh, cry, suffer, struggle and achieve. Clearly, humankind is more than its rational self.

In the spiritual view of man, as presented in the Qur'an, observation and reason are accorded a just position as means for acquiring knowledge. The imperative of observation and interaction is emphasized and appeals are made to the reasoning ability of man. But unlike the secular approach, in the spiritual view of man reason is not an end in itself. It is an aid to something higher. Whereas secular thought regards empirical data as evidence for reason, the spiritual approach regards empirical data as a simile, a Sign, through which reason can become cognizant of a higher Reality. Thus, the world of man weighs down secular thought like a ton of bricks in a balloon and brings it down to the material plain whereas in the spiritual framework the same world becomes ethereal and lifts him up to something higher.

*" Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth,
In the alternation of the night and the day,
In the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the benefit of mankind,
In the rain which God sends down from the skies,
And the life He gives therewith to an earth that is dead,
In the beasts of all kinds,
That he scatters through the earth,
In the change of the winds,
And the clouds which are propelled under their power between the sky and the earth,
Here indeed are Signs,
For people who ponder, reflect and think".
Qur'an (2: 164)*

The narrative of Abraham in the Qur'an illustrates the importance of reason. Abraham was a man of reason and judgment. His sensitive soul looked to the heavens searching for that ultimate Reality. He saw a star and thought it was his Lord. But when the star set, Abraham realized that the star itself was subject to the laws of heaven. If the star was subject to laws, it could not be the Lawgiver. Abraham went through a similar process with the moon and the sun. Each heavenly body, he reasoned, was subject to celestial laws. Reflecting on the relationships of celestial mechanics he reasoned that God was beyond all relationships, that He was the One, the Giver of all laws.

Thus the spiritual approach holds out the possibility of attaining consciousness of Reality through an exercise of reason. The necessity of observation and the nobility of reason are recognized but observation and reason are looked upon as means to answering the ultimate question, what is Reality?

By contrast, in secular thought, observation and reason are ends in themselves. If Abraham were a "philosopher" as modern secular thought would define him, he would have satisfied himself with determining the laws of celestial mechanics as Kepler did three thousand years later. Abraham used the occasion to ask the ultimate question: Who is the Creator of these laws? Thus the secular approach is directed towards the question, what is the natural law? The spiritual approach asks the question, what is the will of God? The difference in the two perspectives arises in their respective ethical frameworks. *In secular science, reason is not bound by ethics. Indeed, reason creates ethics. In the spiritual approach, reason operates within a framework of a higher ethic.*

Man and his Creativity

Humankind is endowed with creativity. In this we are different from the animals. Creativity is the dynamic hand that helps humankind confront and conquer a changing world. It is the power that enables us to transform, guide, mold and subjugate the forces of nature. But what is creativity? Is there a valid measure of creativity? If it can be measured, can it be developed, modified or controlled? We are interested in these questions not only because we are trying to understand the unique attributes of humans but also because we like ourselves to be creative.

Creativity is not imitation.

It may be observed that some animals, like some men, learn through imitation. A monkey brought up by a zookeeper who is a cigarette smoker will want to imitate the act of smoking by thrusting a cigarette in his mouth and relaxing against a tree. A child may do the same if his father is a smoker. Observe a two-year old when he follows his father around in the backyard on a Sunday afternoon. When his father picks up the leaves the child does the same. When his father plants a seed, the child wants to do the same. The child faithfully emulates each activity of his parent. Children learn to speak like their parents. A child born in Louisiana learns to speak with a Southern drawl whereas one born in Chicago learns to speak with a Midwest accent. An East African child learns Swahili and a Japanese child learns Japanese. In all these cases imitation plays a primary role.

Creativity, on the other hand, cannot be imitated. Creativity is conceiving that which has not been conceived before. It is constructing that which has not been built before. It cannot be copied.

Empirical learning involves response to change. Creativity creates the conditions for change.

Empirical knowledge involves sifting through relationships, collecting data, plotting and correlating it and through a process of judgment and extrapolation making sense out of this data. Creativity, on the other hand, need not depend on observations of change; it creates change. For instance, technological inventions have always resulted in social change. The invention of the cotton jenny transformed the face of England in the eighteenth century. The automobile transformed the social fabric of America in the twentieth century. The transistor brought about an electronic revolution the world over. The internet bound the world together. Each one of these inventions profoundly influences the way people relate to each other. Creativity is the hand that molds the face of civilizations.

Intelligence tests are deceptive. They may not measure a person's creativity

Intelligence, as it is measured in IQ tests, primarily measures a person's grasp of relationships. Such relationships are presented to a child in the form of puzzles or mathematical exercises. The child's IQ is measured from his ability to grasp such relationships. This in turn is supposed to reflect his projected performance in school and on the job. Creativity, on the other hand, does not necessarily involve the interplay of relationships. What kind of relationship can a poet search for when his pen compels him to write a sublime poem? What kind of relationship can an artist look for when his brush bursts forth with the ebullience of creative energy? What model can an inventor consult when he conceives of a new machine, a new process or a new method? The creative process is beyond the structured confines of relationships. It has its own dynamics. IQ tests may be a good measure of a child's analytical abilities. They are a poor measure of his creativity. Proper training and tutoring can significantly improve performance on IQ tests. But no number of visits to a great museum will make a great painter out of a mediocre one.

If creativity is beyond the structured confines of relationships, just what are its characteristics?

Creativity is universal.

Whether humans live at the North Pole or the tropics, they are endowed with the same universal proclivity to invent. The transistor was invented in North America; the boomerang in the islands off Australia. The conception of zero came out of the people of India as well as from the Mayans. The Muslim people of the Middle East invented the concept of infinity. Great poets, orators and writers are to be found in all languages. Artists and philosophers are to be found among all races. The receptivity to creative thought is to be found the world over. No continent has been left untouched by the dance of creative energy.

Creativity cannot be taught.

You can teach a man what rhyme and meter are but you cannot teach him to compose inspiring poetry. You can teach a man how to hold a brush but you cannot teach him to be a great artist. You can teach a man to speak but you cannot teach him eloquence. You can teach a man how to do the search but you cannot do the research for him. Creativity cannot be taught. It can only be aspired to.

Creativity is an involuntary process.

The moment of creativity is beyond the control of the person who experiences it. A scientist, for instance, may search for years for an answer to a research problem. The solution may stare him in the face but he may not see it. Then, at the least unexpected moment when he is not even consciously searching for an answer, the solution flashes up to him. It is as if a flash of lightning illuminates the vistas for a man groping in darkness. The panorama is sharp and clear and it leaves its imprint on his soul. The hills stand out in marked contrast to the valleys, their ridges well delineated against the sky. The flash disappears but the memory of what he has seen remains with him. It is left to the investigator to reconstruct what he saw and to give it a concrete form and shape. This may take years of patient work. But all that extra effort, all that toil and struggle is but directed towards recreating and embellishing that single moment of insight.

Great writers, thinkers and philosophers have attested to the spontaneity of the moment of inspiration. Einstein, for instance, is said to have conceived his theory of relativity while doodling as a bank clerk in Vienna.

Creativity is unpredictable.

Several scientists may search for a solution to a common problem. They may use similar instrumentation and similar facilities. There is no *a priori* reason why one of them may win out over the others. Yet it is one person, sometimes the one who is the least expected to succeed that actually hits upon the answer. Creativity is indeed an unpredictable process. The moment of creativity dawns upon searching souls in much the same way that raindrops fall on patches of thirsty soil. There is no rhyme or reason why one patch of earth should be favored over the other.

During the Second World War the Allies and the Germans both searched for a method to make the atom bomb. Both had competent physicists and excellent facilities. Yet, the Americans succeeded while the Germans did not.

The raindrop pattern of creativity demonstrates that it is not an internally controlled process. The trigger that flashes the lightning is an external one. It is beyond the control of the person who experiences it. The moment of creativity is indeed a gift of God. All that man can do is to seek it and to facilitate an environment where creativity is possible. The rest is up to the Giver.

“God does guide whom He will to his light.” Qur’an (24:35)

Creativity may be accompanied by a suspension of the senses.

Some of our most creative moments are in the morning hours, in the first moments after awakening from sleep, when the senses are afloat between the conscious and the subconscious realm. On occasions we try hard for an answer to a question. But try as we may we do not succeed. Then in the least unexpected moment, when the mind is preoccupied with other chores, the answer flashes up to us. Where conscious efforts at creativity fail, the act of creation is dictated to us.

Archimedes is said to have discovered the principle of buoyancy when he was in a bathtub. Elated, he is said to have run out naked into the streets, shouting aloud, “Eureka, Eureka....”

The moment of creativity is a moment of Divine Grace when the Light scribes on the *Nafs* consciousness of that which the self has forgotten. The ability to receive this illumination is a universal, uniquely human ability. No animal has it.

We may ask here, why do men and women in different continents receive the same illumination? Why do people of different nationalities discover the same truth and invent the same machines? The ebullience of identical inspiration in people of different ages living in different continents at different times gives the lie to the anthropological approach to creativity. The raindrop pattern of creativity demonstrates that it is bestowed by an External Agent. The sameness of inventions shows that the *Nafs* (*Soul*) of man receives illumination from a Single Source. The universality of creativity demonstrates that mankind is created from a single *Nafs* and all men and women have a similar nature.

*“O humankind! Be conscious of your Lord,
Who created you from a Single Nafs”
Qur’an (4:1)*

The fountain of Truth is available to all men and women. Some strive to find it and are favored. Others make an attempt but are not successful. A great many never make an attempt.

Humankind is taught through Infusion. Revelation is necessary and sufficient as a Source of Knowledge.

Of all the attributes possessed by man, the one that sets him apart from other creation is his ability to attain consciousness of the Divine. This consciousness is neither irrational nor is it a matter of blind belief. Rather, it is buttressed and supported by the attributes of observation, reason and judgment.

The impossibility of attaining certitude of knowledge through observation or reason has been discussed earlier in this chapter. *Without Divine Guidance man is at a loss, caught up in never-ending arguments of before and after, of cause and effect. Revelation breaks this cycle.* It provides a necessary and sufficient condition for knowledge. Without the authority of revelation, knowledge acquired through observation and reason is like a ladder that dangles in the air, without anchor and without a clear destination. With the support of revelation, observation and reason acquire a firm foundation. They acquire the characteristic of a ladder whose feet are firmly on the ground and whose reach aspires to heaven.

For instance, how do we know that a rose is red? The impasse of “science” to describe color has been explained in earlier sections. The red is neither in the rose nor in the eye. It is an attribute of the *Nafs*. Similarly, reason gives no clues to what is right and what is wrong, or what is just and what is unjust. Rational philosophers have made such attempts and produced the likes of Hume and Miller who claimed that justice is a matter of convenience. Reason without revelation can lead to error. Reason, with revelation, leads to certain knowledge.

Revelation clarifies the condition of man and his relationship to Divine transcendence. It opens up the vision of man to his own inner self so that he can see the Truth. It guides. It liberates. It leads man from darkness to light.

Revelation is knowledge through infusion. It is involuntary. It is knowledge infused into the consciousness of man. It is ultimate wisdom bestowed by the Creator. The Ten Commandments did not evolve over a period of time. They were infused into the consciousness of Moses by Divine Love.

The senses are suspended while the human Soul receives revelation. Moses swooned at Mount Sinai when he was in the presence of the Almighty. The example of the Prophet Muhammed is well documented. His Companions relate that while the Prophet received revelation, he would be in a state of suspension. It was as if the Scribe overtook his Soul and wrote on it with the Pen. The Soul of Muhammed “heard”, “felt”, “understood”, “remembered” and related the Message. His body was covered with sweat and he would cover his face. The intensity of the Light of revelation was so great that the conscious self trembled and showed signs of great stress.

Observation and reason fragment the world into many compartments. Revelation integrates the world into one. It brings together logic and reason, observation and judgment.

Revelation is symbolic knowledge. As such, it appeals to people of all ages and all times. It guides the scholar from Al-Azhar as well as the laborer from Jakarta. People relate to it at their own level. It is like a mountain, portions of which are accessible but whose roots are unfathomable while its heights reach the heavens.

Revelation is *Tawhid*, the consciousness that God is One, the Sublime, Merciful, and Just, Source of all knowledge. It is the assertion of the unity of thought and action, the unity of knowledge, of art and beauty. It is an assertion of the brotherhood of man. It is the proclamation of justice and liberation from all false gods.

The nature of revelation is its own proof. It is involuntary and beyond the ken of any man. It is wisdom that meets the test of time. When expressed in words it is neither prose nor poetry. It is the self-luminescent Word. It floats beyond time and space. It guides and illuminates. It is accessible to everyone yet no vision can circumscribe it. It challenges the scientist and the peasant, the king and the servant, the man of wisdom and the buffoon. It is Divine Love.

The Source of revelation is a Single Source. It is the same fountain from which Abraham and Moses, Jesus and Muhammed drank the elixir of sublime knowledge. There is Unity of knowledge. It dictates that humankind is a brotherhood and sisterhood, that its Creator is One, that the world is but a simile to a higher Truth..

*“However much the impressions of this world allure you,
The hereafter is more noble and everlasting,
This is what is in the earliest of books,*

*In the books of Abraham and Moses".
The Qur'an (87:16-19)*

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