



Reevaluation and Assessment of the Dispute over the Concept of Intellect

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Abstract

The extensive debates concerning intellect have led some thinkers to extend the outcomes of unrelated disputes into the realm of discussions on intellect and religion. This study aims to distinguish between lexical, ontological, and functional disputes regarding intellect and, consequently, to determine which type of disagreement can influence the discourse on intellect and religion.

Keywords: *Concept of Intellect; Function of Intellect; Religious Intellect; Philosophical Intellect*

Introduction

In the debate on intellect and religion, there is a general consensus on the existence of differences in the meaning of intellect. However, what has received less attention is the precise direction of the dispute over intellect. In other words, all thinkers acknowledge that variations in perspectives concerning the relationship between intellect and religion stem from the fact that each individual or school of thought defines intellect in a particular way.

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali warns against hasty definitions of intellect, stating:

"If one asks for a definition of intellect, do not be deceived by a single specific definition, for that would be imprudent. Intellect is a common term applied to multiple meanings." (Al-Ghazālī, 1413 AH: 20)

Elsewhere, he further notes:

"People have differed in their definition of intellect and its essence, and most of them remain unaware that intellect is employed in different senses, which has led to their disagreements." (Al-Ghazālī, undated, Vol. 1: 85)

Similarly, Mulla Sadra, when discussing the various usages of intellect, states:

"People have intense disagreements regarding the definition of intellect, and its true meaning has become unstable." (Ṣadrā, 1383 SH, Vol. 1: 222)

The key question is: To what extent do disputes surrounding the concept of intellect affect the relationship between intellect and religion? Furthermore, how can they clarify the role of intellect in understanding religion and attaining religious knowledge? Merely claiming that disputing parties hold differing views on intellect does not suffice to justify the divergence in perspectives on intellect and religion. In other words, one must demonstrate a logical connection between adopting a particular stance on intellect and the extent of its functional role. If someone affirms a specific stance on intellect, they must also elucidate its consequences and implications. For instance, if an individual claims that religious intellect is distinct from philosophical intellect, they must also illustrate the effects of this distinction rather than merely introducing a new terminological differentiation. Without presenting the implications of affirming or negating a given proposition, the dispute becomes futile.

This study categorizes three domains of discussion regarding intellect, noting that disputes in the first two do not pertain to the relationship between intellect and religion, whereas only the third domain has a potential impact:

1. Lexical and value-based discussions on intellect, which revolve around linguistic and conventional frameworks.
2. Ontological discussions on intellect, which examine its nature and degrees.
3. Epistemological discussions that focus on the function and efficacy of intellect.

The Lexical Dispute over Intellect

Lexicographical works have recorded numerous meanings for the term '*aql*' (intellect) and its derivatives, most of which can be traced back to the notions of restraining or withholding. Ibn Fāris states:

"The root letters 'A.Q.L form a single, widespread origin that predominantly signifies confinement and restraint, or something close to the notion of restricting a thing. Intellect ('*aql*) falls within this category, as it restrains one from improper speech and behavior." (Ibn Fāris, 1422 AH: 647)

Ibn Manzūr reinforces this interpretation, explaining:

"Intellect is named '*aql*' because it prevents its possessor from falling into perils." (Ibn Manzūr, 1997, Vol. 4: 394)

It is essential to note that if a term is entirely unfamiliar to us, consulting a lexicon can be highly beneficial. By examining its synonyms or exploring some of its instances and applications, we can approximate its meaning. If a dispute is of the nature described by Rumi—where four individuals argue over *angur*, '*inab*', *uzum*, and *istafil*, all of which refer to the same object—then the disagreement can be easily resolved by consulting a dictionary or pointing to the referent of these words. However, identifying the lexical meaning of '*aql*' (intellect) does not contribute to resolving the dispute over intellect in the context of religion. This is because all parties involved in the debate are already familiar with its linguistic meaning and do not differ in this regard.

Nevertheless, some scholars argue that neglecting the lexical meaning of intellect has led to differing interpretations of its nature and function. According to them, the translators of Greek philosophy into Arabic applied the term '*aql*' to referents that diverged significantly from its original lexical meaning. In religious discourse, intellect derives its meaning from the familiar usages known to Arabic speakers, whereas philosophical intellect bears no resemblance to these linguistic and religious connotations. This improper equivalence, they argue, has fueled disagreements in discussions of intellect and religion. Some scholars, rather than referring to Arabic lexicons and religious traditions when interpreting sacred texts, have instead adopted definitions prevalent in philosophy. (Berenjkār, 1383 SH: 14)

Ibn Taymiyya has emphasized this issue in several instances, contending that the error of the philosophers stems from their adoption of foreign intellectual concepts and their expression in Arabic terminology and Islamic discourse. This, he argues, leads to a situation where, even when engaging in dialogue with philosophers using the same terminology, the two sides arrive at entirely different conclusions. The intellect is that philosophers intend meanings from these terms that the original linguistic authorities did not assign, making such interpretations unfamiliar to native speakers of the language.

In Arabic and religious discourse, intellect has two principal usages. It either refers to:

1. **A verbal noun** (*maṣḍarī*) signifying an accidental property (‘*araḍ*’), denoting understanding.
2. **A faculty** that is innately embedded in human nature, through which comprehension occurs.

However, philosophers conceive of intellect as a self-subsistent essence (*jawhar*), which is an unfamiliar and foreign meaning in Arabic linguistic tradition. (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1391 AH, Vol. 1: 128)

Analysis and Evaluation

The above criticisms seem to imply that philosophers have overlooked the different usages of intellect and have employed the term indiscriminately. However, a cursory examination of their works reveals that they were fully aware of its multiple meanings and made clear distinctions among them. Avicenna (*Ibn Sina*), for instance, explicitly differentiates between the conventional and philosophical uses of intellect and identifies eleven meanings for the term. The first three pertain to common usage, while the remainder are technical terms used in philosophical discourse.

The common meanings of intellect include:

1. The faculty that enables one to distinguish between praiseworthy and blameworthy actions.
2. General concepts acquired in the mind through experience.
3. A noble character cultivated in an individual through virtuous speech and conduct.

In philosophical discourse, intellect is used in the following senses:

1. Intellect comprises the innate perceptions and judgments of the soul, as opposed to knowledge, which is acquired.
2. Intellect is one of the faculties of the soul, divided into theoretical and practical intellect:
 - **Theoretical Intellect:** Perceives universal concepts.
 - **Practical Intellect:** Directs the soul’s appetitive faculty (*quwwa shawqiyya*) toward particular actions.

Each of the faculties of theoretical intellect is also independently referred to as intellect:

3. **Potential Intellect** (‘*aql hayūlānī*’) – The soul’s initial capacity to receive intelligible forms.
4. **Habitual Intellect** (‘*aql bi’l-malakah*’) – The stage where the soul begins to grasp self-evident concepts and judgments.

5. **Actual Intellect** (*'aql bil-fi'l*) – The stage where the soul, using self-evident principles, attains theoretical knowledge.
6. **Acquired Intellect** (*'aql mustafād*) – The stage where the soul fully internalizes both self-evident and theoretical knowledge, effectively transforming into a microcosmic realm of knowledge.
7. **Active Intellect** (*'aql fa'aāl*) – A transcendent intellect that bestows intelligible forms upon the human soul, elevating it from potential intellect to acquired intellect. (Ibn Sīnā, undated: 88)

Mulla Sadra (*Ṣadr al-Muta'allihīn*) similarly identifies six distinct meanings of intellect across different intellectual traditions, including common usage, ethics, theology, and philosophy. He meticulously differentiates between these applications, notably distinguishing between human intellect and intellect as an independent metaphysical entity. He explains that the term *'aql* is employed equivocally (*ishtirāk lafẓī*) to denote both. (Ṣadrā, 1383 SH, Vol. 1: 223-227)

The conclusion to be drawn is that the diverse terminologies and applications of intellect were neither neglected nor arbitrarily employed by philosophers. On the contrary, they exercised greater precision in distinguishing these meanings than their critics. Therefore, the disagreement between philosophers and their opponents should not be reduced to a mere lexical dispute. It is incorrect to assume, for example, that if Mulla Sadra had known that Ibn Taymiyya regarded intellect as an accidental property rather than a substance, the debate would have been resolved, revealing that each thinker intended a meaning different from the other. Instead, the divergence between these two intellectual traditions reflects a deeper philosophical disagreement, not merely a difference in terminology. Ibn Taymiyya insists that philosophers conceive of the intellect (*'aql*) as an independent substance (*jawhar*), rather than as a faculty that is incidentally acquired by humans and through which perception occurs. This, he argues, is the root of the disagreement concerning intellect and religion. However, the weakness of this claim is evident, as philosophy explicitly differentiates between human intellect and intellect as an independent entity. The latter has no relevance to our discussion, which concerns the function and capacity of human intellect, not its ontological classification as a substance (*jawhar*) or an accident (*'araḍ*), nor the concept of separate intellects (*'uqūl mufāriqa*).

The Dispute over the Essence of Intellect

One may argue that opposition to the philosophers does not stem from their use of the term *'aql* to refer to a substance. Even Ibn Taymiyya acknowledges that coining technical terms is acceptable within various fields of knowledge, provided they remain confined to their respective domains and do not cause misunderstanding in discussions. (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1391 AH, Vol. 1: 128) In other words, the main issue with philosophers is their incorrect application of *'aql* in religious texts, as they impose its philosophical meanings onto scriptural discourse, which constitutes an interpretation inconsistent with the original intent of the texts. The reality of intellect in religious language is entirely different from what is described in philosophy, and this difference affects the perceived efficacy of intellect as well. (Berenjkār, 1374 SH: 193) Therefore, the linguistic disagreement is merely a reflection of a deeper dispute concerning the essence and nature of intellect.

In the following discussion, we will explore the perspectives of philosophers and their opponents regarding the nature of intellect and then examine how these disputes influence the broader debate on intellect and religion.

The Concept of Intellect in the Tradition of *Ahl al-Ḥadīth*

Since the early scholars of *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* (also referred to as the *Salaf*) were primarily concerned with the compilation of Prophetic traditions, they did not leave behind significant works outside of ḥadīth

collections that would allow for a detailed study of their views on intellect. What can be gathered from their statements is limited to brief remarks cited by others:

- “The *Salaf*, such as Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī, and others, believed that intellect is an innate faculty (*gharīza*).” (Ibn Taymiyyah, undated: 94)
- “Al-Shāfi‘ī held that intellect is an innate faculty.” (Ibn ‘Ādil, 1419 AH, Vol. 2: 30)

Qāḍī Abū Ya‘lā (d. 458 AH), a prominent Ḥanbalī scholar, writes that Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal regarded intellect as an innate faculty, meaning that God originally created it within humans rather than it being something acquired through effort. This stands in contrast to the view attributed to some philosophers, who consider intellect to be an acquired trait. (Qāḍī Abū Ya‘lā, 1410 AH, Vol. 1: 85-86)

Abū al-Ḥasan al-Māwardī (d. 450 AH), a Shāfi‘ī jurist, distinguishes between innate intellect (*‘aql gharīzī*) and acquired intellect (*‘aql muktasab*). He states that:

- **Innate Intellect** is the prerequisite for accountability (*taklīf*) in religious law and the foundation upon which devotional obligations are based.
- **Acquired Intellect** enables correct judgment and intellectual deliberation.

However, acquired intellect cannot be separated from innate intellect, while innate intellect can exist without acquired intellect. This is because innate intellect is primary (*aṣl*), and acquired intellect is secondary (*far‘*). Some scholars even refrain from calling the acquired faculty *‘aql*, arguing that it is merely a product of intellect, not intellect itself. (Al-Māwardī, 1409 AH: 19) Al-Māwardī himself considers this a terminological issue of little consequence as long as the intended meaning is clear.

Thus, according to *Ahl al-Ḥadīth*, intellect is not something that can be developed or attained but is a divinely endowed faculty inherent within human nature, enabling individuals to distinguish truth from falsehood.

Is Innate Intellect Distributed Equally?

This raises the question: Is this innate intellect distributed equally among humans, or do individuals differ in their share of it?

Abū Muḥammad al-Barbahārī (d. 329 AH), the author of *Sharḥ al-Sunna*—a fundamental doctrinal text among the Ḥanbalīs—argues that people vary in their endowment of intellect. Since intellect is not acquired but a divine favor (*tafḍīl*), God grants it to individuals in varying degrees, and each person is held accountable only according to the measure of intellect given to them. (Al-Barbahārī, 1408 AH: 37) In this view, this disparity is not a matter of personal choice but is predetermined from birth, similar to physical attributes.

A Philosophical Challenge to This View

It is difficult to conceive that a person is born with a fixed amount of intellect that remains unchanged throughout life. Observationally, human understanding develops from infancy to old age, and it is unintellectable to equate the intellectual capacity of a child with that of an adult. Even *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* do not entirely deny this development. However, as inferred from the statements of Barbahārī and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, the term *‘aql* is reserved strictly for the cognitive faculty itself, not for the knowledge and understanding acquired through experience. (Āl Taymiyyah, undated: 498) Accordingly, what a person gains through education and intellectual effort is a product of intellect rather than intellect itself.

In the insistence on not extending intellect (‘aql) to rational knowledge, there lies a fundamental point that, from the outset, distinguishes the approach of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth from that of the theologians (mutakallimūn) and philosophers (falāsifa). The key issue is that such knowledge can never be employed in understanding religion, as it does not fall within the definition of intellect.

Thus, if an individual claims, "I seek to use intellect in accordance with the directives of religion to properly understand it," and by intellect they mean the sciences and knowledge acquired through rational means, the Ahl al-Ḥadīth would easily respond that such an individual is mistaken. Intellect is a pristine and untarnished divine gift that must remain unchanged. If anything emanates from it, it is considered a human addition, which should not be attributed to religion. What is important is intellect itself, not its intellectual products, for intellect is granted by God, whereas its outcomes are the works of human beings. Consequently, if intellect remains unaltered, it guides human beings, but if anything external is added to it, it leads to deviation and distortion.

Intellect in the Maktab al-Tafkīk (School of Separation)

Among contemporary scholars, proponents of the Maktab al-Tafkīk emphasize an essential distinction between religious intellect (‘aql dīnī) and philosophical intellect (‘aql falsafī). They state: "In the view of philosophers, human intellect is a faculty of the soul and one of its intrinsic levels, making it a human faculty subject to error. However, in religious sources, intellect is not an intrinsic level of the soul; rather, it is a divine gift granted to human beings (to the human soul) and inherently infallible." (Ḥakīmī, 1386 SH: 125)

However, not all their statements are this explicit. In some instances, they assert that human intellect possesses different levels, both surface and depth. The surface level of intellect can only grasp human sciences such as philosophy. These types of knowledge, emerging from the superficial layer of intellect, are unreliable. Instead, what truly leads to the comprehension of realities is the deeper and more profound layers of intellect, which are nourished through revelation (wahy)—a concept referred to as latent intellect (‘aql difā’īnī). (Ḥakīmī, 1384 SH: 68-69)

The proponents of *Tafkīk* have not been successful in clarifying what they mean by religious intellect in contrast to human intellect. As observed, their terminology is inconsistent—sometimes they assert a duality between religious and human intellect, while at other times, they describe intellect as possessing multiple levels, with one level termed religious intellect and another human intellect. Regardless, their central claim remains that one cannot rely on human intellect to attain the truth but must instead seek assistance from religious intellect, which is connected to revelation.

This interpretation of religious intellect, however, entails significant complexity. If the argument is that human beings cannot find their way without divine guidance, this is a position widely acknowledged by Muslim thinkers. However, these same thinkers have employed human intellect to approach revelation and, through it, have attained profound knowledge. The assertion of a distinct type of intellect with an independent essence and function from human intellect has failed to convince even some supporters of the Maktab al-Tafkīk. One of them states: "Some leading figures of the Maktab al-Tafkīk have defined intellect as a luminous reality external to the soul, with which a person is connected. Our intention in speaking of intellect is the very faculty of perception (mā behi al-idrāk), whether it be an immaterial reality, an entity distinct from the soul, or a level of the soul itself." (Sayyidān et al., 1388 SH: 18)

This suggests that the essence of intellect is not the key issue; rather, what truly matters are its intellectual products.

Intellect in Philosophy

Philosophers (ḥukamā') describe intellect as an immaterial substance (jawhar mujarrad), a definition that encompasses both human intellect and separate intellects ('uqūl mufāriqa). Discussions on the immateriality of human intellect are primarily examined under the concept of the rational soul (al-nafs al-nāṭiqa), and philosophers have provided numerous arguments to establish the immaterial nature of the soul.

Ya'qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (d. 252 AH) defines intellect as "an immaterial substance that perceives the reality of things." (Al-Kindī, undated: 113) Similarly, al-Fārābī offers a more detailed explanation by first distinguishing the rational faculty (al-quwwa al-'āqila) from other faculties of the soul, such as the appetitive faculty (al-quwwa al-shahwiyya), the irascible faculty (al-quwwa al-ghaḍabiyya), and the perceptual faculties, including both external and internal senses. He then categorizes intellect into two types: practical intellect ('aql 'amalī) and theoretical intellect ('aql naẓarī). Practical intellect discerns what actions should be undertaken, while theoretical intellect perceives pure intelligibles.

Al-Fārābī further elaborates on the nature of intellect, stating: "It is an immaterial substance that coexists with matter—not in the sense of being material itself, but rather that human intellect requires a material body to operate upon matter. However, after the body's death, it remains as a simple immaterial substance... The true essence of a human being is, in fact, their intellect." (Al-Fārābī, manuscript: 82-89)

However, according to reports from Farābī and, even earlier, from Ibn Sīnā, most sages consider the intellect as one of the faculties of the human self, whereas 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī equates the intellect with the human soul itself rather than regarding it as one of its faculties. The verbal (infinitive) meaning of *intellect* is the complete understanding and apprehension of a thing, while its nominal meaning is attributed to the human soul—by which one can discern the good from the bad and the truth from falsehood. The intellect is not comparable to faculties such as memory or intuition, which are merely branches of the self; rather, the human apprehending soul itself is the intellect. (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1417 AH, Vol. 1: 405) 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī departs from the approach of earlier philosophers, who considered only a specific type of apprehension as "rational" and postulated a particular faculty within the self for that purpose. For the sages it was necessary that sensations, experiences, revelations, reports, and other modes of human cognition each represent a component of the rational; yet, in 'Allāmah's view, everything that enters into ordinary human apprehension is deemed rational.

Contemporary philosophers have also broadened the scope of cognitive apprehensions attributed to the intellect, considering every form of human perception to fall within its domain. 'Allāmah Javādī 'Āmulī, in discussions of religious epistemology, emphasizes that in such matters the intellect should not be confined solely to its philosophical or kalām (theological) aspects, but that its achievements in the empirical, mathematical, and mystical domains must also be taken into account. (Javādī 'Āmulī, 1389 SH: 25) Similarly, Mustafā Malikīān, in response to a question regarding the meaning of *intellect* in the context of a rational defense of religion, states:

"By *intellect* one may refer to the body of sciences and knowledges that are acquired through the ordinary means of obtaining knowledge and understanding—that is, through sensation and experience (both the external and internal senses), reflection, reasoning, and systematic historical transmission." (Malakīān, 1374 SH: 10)

Analysis and Evaluation

Disagreement regarding the nature of the intellect exists not only among various intellectual schools but even within a single school consensus is elusive. Nonetheless, despite differences over the

essence of the intellect, there is a unity of approach among the sages in discussions concerning the intellect and religion. Conversely, while opponents of philosophy do not share a unified view on the nature of the intellect, they have presented a united stance in religious epistemology against the compartmentalization inherent in philosophy. This indicates that the debates concerning ontology and the definition of the intellect do not affect its functionality; otherwise, it would be impossible for two individuals who disagree on the being and essence of the intellect to converge on a common understanding of its operation. This subtle point has not escaped the notice of some astute scholars.

Shaykh Tūsī (p. 460) points out these discrepancies by stating:

“If it is argued that there exists disagreement concerning the intellect, how can one rely on it? The answer is that differences in the nature of the intellect do not result in differences in its propositions. Can this variance in the nature of the intellect—some calling it ‘knowledge’ and others ‘faculty’—possibly lead to discrepancies in propositions such as ‘a thousand is more than one’ or ‘that which exists is not from that which does not exist,’ and similar statements?” (Tūsī, undated, Vol. 1: 201)

He further refers to issues which, in the terminology of the *mutakallimūn*, are termed *ḍarūrīyāt* (necessities). In the definition offered by Ahl al-Ḥadīth, it is observed that they apply the term *intellect* solely to the faculty of apprehension itself, considering the resultant propositions as products of intellectual apprehension rather than as the intellect per se. In contrast, many *mutakallimūn*—including Shaykh Tūsī—equate the intellect with rational knowledges. Yet, irrespective of the debate over the true nature of the intellect, Shaykh Tūsī emphasizes its functionality by citing propositions derived from the intellect that remain undisputed regardless of its definition.

Qāḍī ‘Abdul-Jabbār Mu‘tazilī (p. 415) is also among those who have conducted extensive research on the nature of the intellect. In his work *al-Mughni*, he provides a detailed discussion on the subject and examines various perspectives regarding the essence of the intellect—whether it is an instinct, a faculty, an instrument, or an essence. He considers most of these differences to be merely verbal disputes, arguing that proponents of these divergent theories are essentially referring to the same phenomenon, each seeking to explain the functionality of the intellect but erring in their choice of terminology. He concludes:

“The fundamental point is that the intellect itself is not the ultimate objective. The intellect is only of interest insofar as it enables us to acquire sciences and fulfill our obligations. Consequently, the rational being must possess certain knowledges that allow it to obtain the necessary understandings and perform its duties.” (Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, 1962-1965 CE, Vol. 11: 379)

In other words, Qāḍī ‘Abdul-Jabbār maintains that the intellect is instrumental in acquiring religious knowledges and fulfilling religious obligations, rather than being an object in itself. In his view, disputes over the nature of the intellect cannot provide a solution to practical issues; what is crucial is the utilization of the intellect to resolve problems. Moreover, the Qur’ān emphasizes the importance of contemplation and reflection and has never sought to define the intellect. This supports the view that focusing on the nature of the intellect, rather than on its practical application, detracts from its primary purpose—namely, contemplation.

The Debate on the Function of the Intellect (‘Aql)

In contemporary thought, philosophers and scholars have increasingly focused on epistemology. Epistemological inquiries often raise fundamental questions that must be addressed before one can meaningfully engage in ontological discussions. For instance, does the intellect (aql) possess the capacity to comprehend metaphysical realities? If so, to what extent is rational cognition (idrāk al-aqlī) considered valid and reliable? (Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, 1379 SH, Vol. 1: 146-147) Consequently, rather than exploring the

ontology or essence of the intellect and other epistemic faculties directly, attention has shifted to examining the perceptions and cognitions acquired through these faculties. Indeed, the mechanisms and processes underlying cognition itself generally fall outside the domain of epistemology, instead being addressed within the psychological sciences—specifically cognitive psychology. Similarly, the ontological dimensions of intellect and other cognitive faculties are usually discussed within philosophical psychology (*ilm al-nafs*).

In classical Islamic scholarship, “discussions on cognition predominantly revolved around the psychology of perception and the ontology (*ontolojī*) of knowledge (*‘ilm*), rather than epistemology (*ma‘rifat-shināsī*) in its modern sense.” (Husaynẓādah, 1386 SH: 239) Thus, most statements by early Islamic scholars on cognitive matters pertain more closely to the psychology of perception and ontology of knowledge rather than to contemporary epistemological concerns. (Malikiyān, 1379 SH: 13) Nevertheless, certain researchers continue to investigate fundamental questions such as: “Is the intellect an independent, distinctive, and ontologically real entity, or is it merely a conceptual, abstract construct (*amr i‘tibārī wa intizā‘ī*)? And what exactly is its relationship to the human soul (*nafs*)? Furthermore, upon what ontological reality or essence are the diverse epistemic functions asserted by theological schools (*al-madhāhib al-kalāmīyah*)—some of which at times appear to contradict revealed knowledge (*waḥy*)—founded?” (Malik Makān & Ṭalaqānī, No. 84: 130-131) Nonetheless, contemporary scholars across diverse intellectual traditions have largely moved away from exploring these foundational ontological questions and instead have directed their attention toward examining the practical functions and limits of the intellect (*‘aql*).

In the discourse on reason and religion (*aql wa dīn*), what truly proves beneficial is identifying the capacities, limitations, and boundaries of rational cognition. While classical scholars did not systematically or extensively elaborate upon this issue in dedicated works, their perspectives on the functionality of reason can still be inferred from various statements and their overall scholarly practices. Broadly speaking, two primary views among Islamic thinkers regarding the functionality of intellect can be distinguished: proponents of a minimal function (*al-ḥadd al-adnā*) of reason and advocates of its maximal function (*al-ḥadd al-aqṣā*). However, categorizing these two groups as rationalists (*aqlīyūn*) versus literalists or textualists (*naṣṣīyūn* or *ẓāhirīyūn*) appears biased, as this dichotomy typically arises from the standpoint of those who uphold maximal rational capacities, portraying their opponents as anti-rational.

Ibn Taymīyah sharply critiques those who accuse the Ahl al-Ḥadīth (traditionists) of being anti-rational, emphasizing that their fundamental difference with their critics lies not in denying reason altogether, but rather in their differing conceptions of rationality. He writes:

“Amazingly, the theologians (*al-mutakallimūn*) presume that the adherents of ḥadīth and sunnah (Ahl al-Ḥadīth wa al-Sunnah) are followers of blind imitation (*taqlīd*) rather than reasoning (*naẓar*) and rational argumentation (*istidlāl*), accusing them of rejecting the authority of reason (*ḥujjiyat al-‘aql*). Indeed, some have even attributed a denial of rational reflection to certain imams of the sunnah, criticizing them on this basis. This claim, however, is utterly false. The Ahl al-Sunnah and the adherents of ḥadīth do not deny anything mentioned explicitly in the Qur’ān—this is an unanimously agreed-upon principle among them. God (Allāh) frequently commands reflection (*tafakkur*), contemplation (*tadabbur*), reasoning, and taking heed (*aql*, *tadhakkur*, *tafakkur*) throughout the Qur’ān. No prominent scholar or imam from the righteous predecessors (*al-salaf*) or later sunnī scholars has ever rejected this command... Rather, the dispute arises due to the equivocal nature of terms like reflection (*fikr*) and rational argumentation (*istidlāl*)... They [Ahl al-Ḥadīth] reject only the theological innovations (*bid‘a kalāmīyah*), characterized by fallacious reasoning and invalid argumentation.” (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1426 AH, Vol. 4: 55)

Finally, it should be noted that similarity in views between two scholars regarding the functionality of the intellect does not necessarily indicate agreement on other doctrinal matters. It is entirely possible for two thinkers from different intellectual traditions (nīḥal) or schools (madāhib), despite significant differences elsewhere, to share similar views regarding the function and scope of rational cognition (‘aql).

The Function of Intellect (‘Aql) according to Ahl al-Ḥadīth

It has previously been stated that the term ‘aql (intellect) as used by the Ahl al-Ḥadīth tradition exclusively refers to the innate faculty (*al-gharīzah al-‘aqlīyah*), and not to the knowledge (‘ulūm) or cognitions (*ma‘ārif*) derived through this innate capacity. Although the precise scope of this innate intellect has not been explicitly delineated in the sources of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth tradition, a close examination of Ibn Taymīyah’s remarks in his work, *Dar’ Ta‘āruḍ al-‘Aql wa-l-Naql*, suggests that this group regards the function of intellect as confined merely to perceiving self-evident matters (*al-umūr al-badīhiyah*) and differentiating between things, without attributing to it any higher epistemic capacity.

In support of those who consider revelation (*sam‘*) as the sole path to religious knowledge (*ma‘rifah al-dīn*), rather than reason, Ibn Taymīyah states:

“By intellect (‘aql), they mean the innate faculty (*gharīzah*) and its necessary consequences (*lawāzim*), namely, those cognitions (‘ulūm) accessible to all rational persons (‘uqalā’). Intellect in this sense alone cannot independently yield knowledge (*ma‘rifah*); rather, it requires something additional beyond this innate intellect.” (Ibn Taymiyyah, Vol. 9: 17)

From Ibn Taymīyah’s explanation, it becomes clear that the reason some scholars exclude the intellect from the process of acquiring knowledge is due to its limitation to matters universally accessible to all rational beings, which strictly correspond to self-evident truths. Evidently, such knowledge (‘ulūm) encompasses only immediate axiomatic propositions (*badīhiyāt*), and one cannot attribute other forms of knowledge universally to all rational agents.

Although Ibn Taymīyah vigorously defends the standpoint of Ahl al-Ḥadīth against philosophers (*falāsifah*) and theologians (*mutakallimūn*), he recognizes the inherent limitations and weaknesses of their conception of intellect when addressing apparent conflicts between reason and revelation (*ta‘āruḍ al-‘aql wa-l-naql*). He clearly perceives that such a limited intellect lacks sufficient epistemic efficacy; consequently, claiming rationality (‘aqlānīyah) while restricting intellect merely to axiomatic knowledge is untenable. An intellect tasked with knowing God (*ma‘rifat Allāh*), comprehending higher religious truths, and responding effectively to opponents’ doubts (*shubuhāt*) must possess significantly greater cognitive capability than the minimal intellect proposed by Ahl al-Ḥadīth.

Accordingly, Ibn Taymīyah occasionally acknowledges the perspective of Ahl al-Ḥadīth alongside those who apply the term intellect to intellectual knowledge itself, asserting the validity of both views. He posits that, from one perspective, intellect can refer to the cognitive faculty itself, while from another, it can denote the products of this faculty—i.e., cognition and knowledge (*idrāk wa ‘ilm*) resulting from it. (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1403 AH, Vol. 2: 161-162)

It is evident that Ibn Taymīyah seeks through this dual interpretation to avoid direct confrontation with earlier Imams of the Salaf tradition, despite personally not adhering to such a narrow interpretation of intellect. Indeed, his extensive dialectical engagements demonstrate his acceptance of a broader intellectual scope. Explicitly stating that knowing God (*ma‘rifat Allāh*) is impossible through innate intellect alone, he writes:

“Indeed, God is known and worshipped through knowledge (*‘ilm*), not merely by innate intellect (*gharīzah ‘aqlīyah*). This is correct, and no one who properly understands this statement would dispute it.” (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1391 AH, Vol. 4: 378)

He further clarifies that even those who claim that God can be known through reason do not intend mere innate rational faculty, but rather rational sciences (*‘ulūm ‘aqlīyah*). (Ibid.) Thus, based on this understanding, Ahl al-Ḥadīth avoided engaging in theological disputes (*munāqashāt kalāmīyah*), discouraging others from such engagement as well. Their exclusive authoritative source in doctrinal matters was the Prophetic tradition and any extra-prophetic statement was deemed an innovation (*bid‘ah*). (Al-Ash‘arī, 1400 AH: 294)

The Function of Intellect (‘Aql) according to Akhbārī Scholars

Although the Akhbārī scholars of Shī‘ah Islam primarily diverge from Uṣūlī scholars regarding methodologies for deriving juridical rulings (*istinbāṭ al-aḥkām al-shar‘īyah*), their views on reason nonetheless significantly impact the approach to religious knowledge (*ma‘ārif al-dīn*). Concerning the perspective of Mullā Muḥammad Amīn al-Astarābādī (d. 1036 AH/1626 CE), it is observed:

“His definition of intellect (*‘aql*) does not substantially differ from others. By intellect, he refers to the ‘faculty of discernment and cognition’ (*quwwat al-tamyīz wa-l-idrāk*), through which humans differentiate right (*ṣawāb*) from wrong (*khaṭa*) and engage in reasoning and inference (*istidlāl wa istintāḥ*). However, what al-Astarābādī vigorously opposes—and where he strongly differs with non-Akhbārī thinkers—is the absence of limits or boundaries imposed upon the application of intellect. He rejects considering intellect as the universal standard and definitive criterion for acquiring certain and conclusive knowledge (*al-‘ilm al-yaqīnī*) in all worldly (*dunyawīyah*) and otherworldly (*ukhrawīyah*) matters.” (Riḍwānī, 1388-1389 SH: 184)

Similarly, Shaykh Yūsuf al-Baḥrānī (d. 1186 AH/1772 CE) maintains that all Islamic rulings (*aḥkām al-shar‘īyah*) are purely revealed (*tawqīfīyah*), admitting no interference by reason. Furthermore, outside jurisprudence, he considers only self-evident rational propositions, such as “one is half of two” (*al-wāḥidu niṣfu al-ithnayn*), as authoritative and valid. (Baḥrānī, 1363 SH, Vol. 1: 132)

The Function of Intellect (‘Aql) according to Imāmī Thinkers

Shī‘ī scholars, whether theologians (*mutakallimūn*) or philosophers (*falāsifah*), generally maintain a very positive view regarding the capabilities and potential of the intellect (*‘aql*). Although some Imāmī thinkers, such as Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413 AH/1022 CE), have conditioned the validity of intellectual findings upon the confirmation of religious law (*shar‘*), they still affirm the crucial role of reason in understanding religious truths. Shaykh al-Mufīd asserts that the intellect, in its process of perception and reasoning, requires the guidance of divine revelation (*sam‘*), and human beings cannot reach conclusions without the aid of prophetic teachings. Thus, according to the Imāmī school, religious obligations (*taḳlīf*) are tied to the coming of the Prophet (*nubuwwah*), aligning with Ahl al-Ḥadīth, in contrast to the Mu‘tazilites, Khawārij, and Zaydīyah, who believe that intellect can operate independently of divine revelation. (Al-Mufīd, 1413 AH: 33-50)

However, Shaykh al-Mufīd's view on the dependence of intellect on revelation in matters of understanding and reasoning was not adopted by later Shī‘ī theologians. Shaykh al-Ṭūsī (d. 460 AH/1067 CE), following his teacher Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā‘ī, argued that intellect can independently comprehend certain matters even before receiving revelation, and that the foundation of revelation is built upon reason. He contended that the belief in the unity (*tawḥīd*) and justice (*‘adl*) of God must precede faith in the Prophet. If one accepts the truth of the Prophet's message based on the prior announcement of the previous Prophet, the same foundational principles are repeated, and thus either one must acknowledge

the legitimacy of intellect before revelation or fall into an infinite regress (*tasalsul*). (Al-Ṭūsī, undated, Vol. 3: 395; Vol. 6: 457)

Allāmah al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī also maintains that although the Qur'ān commands reflection and reasoning (*tafkīr wa ta'abbur*) in more than three hundred verses, it never prescribes a specific method for thought or reasoning. The Qur'ān leaves this to humans, allowing them to find their way according to their innate nature (*fiṭrah*) and intellectual instincts (*irtikāzāt*). He highlights self-evident propositions (*bādihīyāt*) and asserts that no two human beings would disagree on these types of propositions. These self-evident truths serve as the foundation for reasoning (*istidlāl*) to uncover the unknown. According to him, human nature knows no other way than to begin with these self-evident truths and gradually solve more complex issues. (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1417 AH, Vol. 5: 255-256)

Thus, the scope of intellect's functionality cannot be externally imposed upon it, but rather it is the intellect itself that determines its own capacity and limitations. In Imāmī thought, the intellect opens the door to religion and, within the domain of religion, it can be utilized to correctly understand religious propositions. As Professor Jawādī Āmulī states, "The intellect, in proving the fundamental principles of religion, such as the existence of the Creator (*mabda*), the unity of the Creator (*wāḥidīyah*), the names and attributes of the Creator (*asmā' wa ṣifāt*), the necessity of sending a prophet (*nubuwwah*), and the revelation of books (*tanzīl*), has clear and evident foundations (*mabādi' wa mābānī*). The intellect, in its various levels—from empirical intellect (*'aql tajrībī*) to semi-abstract and purely abstract intellects (*'aql tajrībī wa tamthīlī*), can reveal religious rulings if it leads to certainty (*yaqīn*) or tranquility (*ṭamānīnīyah*) in knowledge. It thus complements the role of transmitted knowledge (*naql*) in understanding religious laws." (Jawādī Āmulī, 1389 SH: 52-53)

Conclusion

The least outcome of revisiting the debate on the concept of intellect (*'aql*) is the avoidance of the erroneous path that thinkers like Ibn Taymīyah and the proponents of the theory of separation (*tafrīq*) have taken. These thinkers have made considerable efforts to establish a religious intellect (*'aql dīnī*) alongside human reason (*'aql basharī*), attempting to resolve the apparent conflicts between reason and revelation. By this approach, human intellect's findings are seen as in conflict with revelation, rather than religious intellect itself. What theologians and philosophers call reason and the call of the Qur'ān and Sunnah to reflection (*ta'aqqul*) are viewed by these thinkers as unrelated to the intellect intended by religion.

As seen, the arguments of this group in their verbal and substantive dispute over proving an independent religious intellect lacked sufficient strength. Therefore, in order to correctly understand the relationship between intellect and religion and resolve some of the conflicts, one must follow the path of Muslim thinkers who believe in the maximal function (*ḥadd aqṣā*) of intellect. In other words, when the dispute in the first two domains yields no results, and the outcomes of such debates fail to provide clarity in the discussion of reason and religion, all intellectual and transmitted arguments should focus on the maximal use of intellect (*'aql*) without any specific qualifier.

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