

# THE INTELLECT IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT: MIND AND HEART

By:  
Karim Douglas Crow

## Introduction

The Arabic term *al-‘aql* / “intelligence/understanding/ reason” is one among half-a-dozen of the most important concepts occurring throughout Islamic experience and thought. From the beginning of the Islamic era, it had been an opaque term, and Muslim scholars did not always agree that *‘aql* was univocal in meaning. In its early Islamic unfolding the concept of *‘aql* comprised the intersection of primarily Arab and Qur’anic as well as Biblicic components with Hellenic and Iranian traditions. *‘Aql* became the carrier of multiple overlapping or diverging meanings, if not already before Islam among the old Arabs; it assumed particular significances in ethics, humanistic studies (*adab*), prosody and rhetoric, law, theology, philosophy, as well as in spiritual and metaphysical speculations.<sup>1</sup> A review of the Islamic understanding of ‘reason’ and ‘rationality’ would have to deal with the chief disciplines wherein rationality played an extensive role: legal theory (*usul al-fiqh*), speculative theology (*kalam*), philosophy (*falsafah*) and rational spirituality (*hikmah & ‘irfan*). Attention should also be given to pronounced anti-rationalist features of Traditionalism.

Language and ideas take political and theological expression through discourse, narrative, literary genre or technique, and community setting.<sup>2</sup> In terms of contemporary discourse analysis or text semiotics, contextual employments of this term were commonly viewed by classical Muslim scholars to exemplify a form of textual polysemy admitting multiple significances when its meaning was appropriated by different circles. The attempts of the lexicologists from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Honwards subscribe to the goal of textual monosemy by searching for an original concrete sense or objective interpretation, through its derivation from *al-‘iqal* /the camel’s binding cord. Successive layers of conceptual drift in linguistic usage over centuries have covered up the thought-forms and experiences of earlier notions. Such early conceptualizations might now appear strange or unfamiliar to many contemporary Muslims, although their foundations are still manifest in Islamic Tradition literature, religious and philosophical ethics, and spirituality.

Early Islamic creation teachings were inspired by the Qur’an and closely related Biblicist (Jewish & Christian) traditions, yet they would grow to encompass the Hellenic emphasis on intelligible reality preceding and transcending the psycho-physical realms, as with the *falasifah* and related trends in philosophical Shi‘ism. During the twentieth century *‘aql* enjoyed a reincarnation among modernist Muslim thinkers in the face of Western cultural and political

challenges.<sup>3</sup> Recently, there has been a growing interest among contemporary thinkers in *al-nazar al-'aqli*/the 'rational argumentation' of the Qur'an.<sup>4</sup> Today, 'aql' most often connotes 'reason', mentality, or discursive mentation, reflecting the brain conception prevalent in our contemporary mentality—(eg. 'aql ilaktruni 'electric brain', computer; or mukhkh ilaktruni).<sup>5</sup>

## Reason

There are several views on how to understand or define 'reason' and 'rationalism'. In the ancient and medieval worlds 'reason' was often defined in practical terms as an innate trait or faculty of the person; or in a more theoretical vein as a non-spatial 'substance' belonging to the immaterial realm of existence, while at the same time forming part of the human soul with the capacity for perceiving knowledge and exercising cognition. As *an avenue for knowledge and a cognitive function*, reason involves the distinction between innate ideas or conceptions (either as 'intuition', or as inborn direct necessary knowledge), and that of acquired or demonstrative knowledge—including both sensory experience, revealed guidance, as well as formal rational-cognitive procedures for ascertaining truth. In addition, reason was always intimately linked with the affective (emotional) and intentional reality of ethical action at the level of conscience and will, and was deemed central to self-awareness and consciousness.

However, in contemporary understanding 'reason' is most often defined as a 'mental faculty', namely, a faculty of the human 'mind' having a distinct capacity for knowledge—in contrast to sense experience. This mentalist conception of reason was at the root of the opposition between Rationalism and Empiricism, since the latter gives priority to sensory data. 'Science' proceeds from empirical observation and measurement, while its truth claims are generally seen to adhere to a canon of formal rational procedures yielding probability in most cases. Current notions of reason and mind almost always embrace a physicalistic 'brain' or bodily conception, as in cognitive psychology based on empirical bio-genetic and neurophysiological studies that stress the biological basis of cognition by studying the neurophysiology of meaning-perception in humans.

These current notions of reason derive from the period of the Enlightenment and from Continental Rationalism, and they reflect a confidence in the unbridled powers of the human intellect (viewed in terms of 'brain-mind') as a source of knowledge. Intellect was then conceived of in opposition to 'faith' and uncritical acceptance of traditional revealed authority as well as to superstition and magic. The eighteenth-century European thinkers of the Enlightenment opposed the traditional Christianity of the institutionalized Church by rejecting 'non-rational' factors of traditional spiritual authority and faith, and they viewed reason as contrasted with 'feeling' or 'emotion'. Modern notions of reason and of rationalism arose out of

this spirit of anti-supernaturalism, being an anti-religious and anti-clerical movement of utilitarian outlook stressing historical and scientific arguments against theism.

Thus, the notion of ‘soul’ is now considered problematic due to its spiritualistic connotations, and the term ‘mind’ has replaced ‘soul’ in current western discourse. Presently, the term ‘rationalism’ appears on the way to being replaced by ‘humanism’; while the term ‘irrational’ conveys a (negative) connotation of ‘spiritual’ or ‘supernatural’ associated with transcendent values. Contemporary discussions on consciousness and the philosophy of mind also reflect this conceptual drift toward a (monist) brain conception, where ‘mind’ substitutes for the ‘soul’ concept of the past. ‘Mind’ is frequently allied with brain functions and given a physical locus, or alternatively it is denied any spatial locale and simply reduced to “mental events”. Recently, there have appeared a number of creative but tentative attempts to reconceptualize notions of ‘reason’ and ‘intelligence’ along anti-mentalistic or ‘personological’ lines, several drawing on the experience and practice of older non-Western traditions or even popular ‘folk’ conceptions. In the past several decades concepts such as ‘moral intelligence’, ‘emotional intelligence’ or recently ‘spiritual intelligence’ have been popularized in attempts to broaden our conception of what constitutes human rationality and intellect.

The widespread misconception that the conflict between ‘Reason and Revelation’ or between Science and Faith-based traditional authority experienced by Western-European and the subsequent contemporary Western civilization, must also have been experienced within the preceding Islamic civilization, should be laid to rest. (The very same misconception is behind Western puzzlement over why Muslims have not become more secularized.) This unwarranted assumption led in the past to patently wrong assessments of Muslim thought and experience, and continues to foster genuine misunderstanding concerning the real nature of Islamic religious and intellectual traditions. This misunderstanding arose partly from the Euro-centric worldview of Western imperialism inherited by postcolonial globalizing culture in a type of intellectual default; and partly out of entrenched ignorance and explicit hostility.

In contrast to the western view, classical Islamic notions of ‘intelligence’ or ‘reason’ embraced the *faith-induced dimension of knowledge* yielding conviction and moral-volition in the operation of human intelligence, being intimately joined with its cognitive or perceiving-knowing dimension. This ‘practical’ ethico-religious dimension of reason has a close connection with ethical endeavor and moral-volition (the faculty of conation). Ethics is the domain of practical reason or ‘prudential-mind’ (*‘aql amali*), involving the power of conation (volition, will-power): the impulse or striving to change one’s behavior and act in accordance with the directives of both inner conscience and outer guidance or divinely revealed imperatives mediated in revelation.

The normative view in Islamic civilization was always that of faith-in-reason while also simultaneously recognizing the limits-of-reason. Remember that the very term for ‘reason

intelligence' in Arabic, *al- 'aql*, has at the core of its basic linguistic meaning the practical idea of 'restraining' and 'binding' as an interior self-imposed limit - of holding one's self back from blameworthy conduct (the polarity of *'aql* vs. *jahl* / intelligence vs. ignorance, or wisdom vs. folly). In Islamic thought, those who taught that reason alone is the sole human authority in attaining truth were regarded as disbelievers. Such individuals were very rare - eg. the physician-philosopher Abu Bakr al-Razi (d.313/ 925 or ca. 323/935 in Rayy) who denied prophecy and embraced Platonic and Galenic teachings, even while he wrote on the validity of alchemy as an empirical science and drew on Gnostic teachings in his cosmology. Rationalists attacked the Traditionalists and their doctrines on the basis of reason, claiming that much-but *not all*-religious knowledge may be known only by means of reason.

### Intelligence

Qur'anic logic and polemic persuasion form part of the operation of God's 'absolutely compelling argument' (*al-hujjat al-balighah*) in guiding to truth or delivering from error: *a-fa la ta'qiluna....* The invariably verbal Qur'anic employment of *ya'qilu* might be interpreted as already intimating an Hellenic component, depending on how one comprehends the essential doctrine of God's *ayat* / 'Signs' operating a species of semiotic pointers to the divine providential purpose at all levels of creation. The evidentiary role of the *ayat* in the creation theology of the Qur'an (see the semantic fields of terms *ya'qilu*, *tafakkur*, & *ulu l-albab*), reflects the deep concern for a teleological mode of thought within Prophetic monotheistic wisdom teachings, where humans are asked to ponder and exercise sapiential reflection over the regularity, precision, correspondences and beauty in nature. Glimpsing the wisdom of the overall design leads to a form of intuitive discernment of the Creator<sup>6</sup> and of one's own creaturely status, which was deemed by the theologians to be an innate form of necessary knowledge provided to all humans (*'ilm daruri*).

One may further discern in the Qur'an the inter-linked notions of a cognitive elite, the 'possessors of understanding' (*ulu l-albab*) distinguished by their knowledge, wisdom and God-mindfulness (*'ilm*, *hikmah*, *taqwa*), as well as of a cognitive scale forming a hierarchy of response and of understanding on the part of the faithful (*tafakkur* & *tadabbur* | *'aql* | *dhikr* | *yaqin* / pondering | comprehending | remembrance | certainty), those who are privy to knowledge and special grace both here and in the Hereafter. Thus, *'aql* constitutes a key element in the human reception of divine guidance. This nexus between faith and understanding has always been a hallmark of intelligent Islamic spirituality, wherein the emotions and instinctive faculties operate harmoniously with the proper exercise of human reason and understanding, promoting the true felicity and blessings intended by the Creator of our reason. (Wisdom literature, with its international and supra-religious themes, represents a thought-world common to the ancient Orient.

From early times it included both instruction in practical ethics, as well as theological speculations on the meaning of human suffering and divine justice. Sapiential speculations crossing many cultural boundaries align wisdom with light and mind or spirit. Wisdom grew to embrace not merely an anthropological capacity to successfully negotiate life's challenges, but a rational system of interpreting and ordering the cosmos, and the beginnings of philosophy and science; as well as a personification, a divine hypostasis and mediator of revelation and creation, or an attribute of God. In Arab-Islamic 'utterances' and 'wise sayings' (*aqwal & hikam*, sing. *qawl & hikmah*) of the first and second centuries H, the notion of 'aql featured prominently as chief of the *akhlaq* /'virtuous character traits' and the glorious adornment of humans in both worldly and otherworldly affairs.

Here are ten representative statements gathered from the first three centuries of Islam, landmarks upon the trajectory of enrichment of meaning for the 'aql notions that disclose a definite process of islamization:<sup>7</sup>

1. "*al-mar'u bi-asgharayhi lisanihi wa 'aqlih* [or *qalbih*, *ma'qulih*,<sup>8</sup> *jananih*] /Man's worth lies in his two smallest parts – his tongue and his heart mind." An old Arab maxim popularized in gnomic verses.<sup>9</sup> It is the point behind the tale of the legendary pre-Islamic sage Luqman twice dressing a sheep for his master, then bringing him respectively the two best parts and two worst parts: in both cases the tongue and heart.<sup>10</sup>

2. "*wa qalu law kunna nasma'u aw na'qilu ma kunna fi ashabi l-sa'iri* / And they will say, 'Had we but heeded [divine revelation] or understood, we would not now be among the inmates of the Blazing Fire!'" Qur'an *al-Mulk* 67:10 - depicting the lament and regret of disbelievers in Hell.

3. "*ma qiladatun nuzimat min durr wa yaqut bi-azyana lisahibiha min al-'aqli wa law nasaha l-mar'u 'aqluhu la-arahu ma yuzayyinuha mimma yushinuhu fa-l-maghbunu man akhta'a hazzahu min al-'aql* / No necklace strung of pearls and sapphires is more of an adornment to its owner than (the innate talent of) intelligence; if his intelligence sincerely counseled a man [ie. Directs him to the good], then it teaches him to distinguish what graces him from what disgraces him; so the truly defrauded is one who missed his share fortune of intelligence." An 'utterance' /*qawl* of the late 1st century H Yamani Successor/ *tabi'i*<sup>11</sup> Tawus b. Kaysan (d. 100 or 106 H).

4. "*afdalu qismi llahi li-l-mar'i 'aqluhu* /The most superlative of God's allotment to man is his (inborn disposition of) intelligence." This popular 1<sup>st</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup> century H saying was attributed to a variety of persons and occurs in a number of forms.

5. "*ma'ubida llahu bi-shay'in afdala min al-'aql* /God is not worshipped with anything more surpassing than the intelligence understanding."<sup>12</sup> Assigned to either Luqman, or to the 1st

century H Yamani scholar and collector of ancient wisdom Wahb b. Munabbih; this famous wisdom motto originally prefaced a decade listing the virtuous character traits of the sage (*'aql*), or faithful one (*mu'min*); it became detached to serve either as an epitome of the original decalogue or as a separate utterance.

6. “*ma khalaqa llahu mithla l-'aql* /God created nothing like unto the [innate faculty of human] intelligence.”<sup>13</sup> Assigned to the 1st century H Successor al-Hasan al-Basri (d.110/728), and thereafter ‘raised’ to the Prophet Muhammad.

7. “*lamma khalaqa llahu l-'aqla qala la-hu aql ...* / When God had created the [divinely provisioned innate trait of] intelligence, He said to him, ‘Face forward!’...” This *qawl* in the form of a brief mythic narrative portraying the creation and testing of *'aql* was taught by a number of late 1st early 2nd century H authorities (including al- Hasan & Muhammad al-Baqir), and often assigned to various Companions; it quickly became ‘raised’ into a Prophetic *hadith* by the late 2nd century. The original context of this narrative was to mediate theological views about the human capability to perform deeds, within the intense early debates over *qadar*.

8. “*inna llaha khalaqa l-'aqla wa huwa awwalu khalqin khalaqahu min al-ruhaniyyin .....* /God created *al-'aql* [intelligence wisdom] and it is the first creature He created among the ‘spiritual immaterial beings’ [ie. bodiless hosts, Archangels] on the right side of the Throne from His Light. Then He said to him, ‘Face forward!’...” This expansion of the immediately preceding narrative was taught by the 2nd century H imams Ja‘far al-Sadiq (d.148/765) and his son Musa al-Kazim. It functions as a cosmic setting for a listing of seventy-five pairs of virtues and vices in a psychomachia of purgative mysticism and psychological dualism (*'aql* light vs. *jahl* darkness).

(The motif of *'aql* as light - eg. the early utterances: “...a light in the heart /*nurun fi l-qalb*,” or “a lamp in the body /*sirajun fi l-badan*” - deriving from the supernal realm of the divine Throne, clearly reflects the impact of Near Eastern teachings concerning pre-existing Heavenly Wisdom, as was the pattern in Biblicic as well as Zoroastrian religions. In this rarified realm, the immateriality or ‘spiritualacy’ of *'aql* is uppermost, with its creation preceding physical existence. Often *'aql* was portrayed in opposition to its ‘adversary’/*did* as a personification of the ‘appetitive soul’ (*nafs, hawa*), or of ‘ignorance folly’ and ‘stupidity’ (*jahl, humq*), in a psychological duality.<sup>14</sup> This type of interiorized dualism had long been a feature of Near Eastern Wisdomteachings. With Ja‘far al-Sadiq the polarity *'aql* /‘intelligence wisdom’ vs. *jahl* /‘ignorance folly’ became a vehicle to expound upon the conflict between Adam and *Iblis*, both being empowered by God with psychic traits. While he depicts *'aql* as the “first immaterial spiritual being” created by God and deriving its source from divine light, the centrality of its nexus with the innate trait of human intelligence is never lost sight of.)

9. In an interesting narrative included in the 2nd century H Basran- Baghdadi proto-Sufi Dawud b. al-Muhabbar's *Kitab al-'Aql*, the Companion 'Abdallah Ibn Salam (d. 43/663, a convert from Judaism) is seen to question the Prophet Muhammad about the Throne /*al-'arsh* as the greatest of all God's creations. The Prophet informs Ibn Salam that the angels once asked God about the greatest creation, even greater than the Throne—namely, *al-'aql*—being beyond the comprehension of even the angels. God informs the angels:<sup>15</sup>

*'...Knowledge of it cannot be fully comprehended! Do you have knowledge of the number of grains of sand?!<sup>16</sup> ... Truly I created al-'aql as diverse sorts like the number of grains of sand. Of that I give some people a single grain, and to some two or three grains, and to some I give an entire sack; and I give to some of them one camel's load, to some two loads, and to some, more.'*

...[when Ibn Salam asks the Prophet who receives such compounded measures, the Prophet replies:] 'Those who labor in accordance with obedience to God, (are given measures of *'aql*) in proportion to their deeds and their diligence and their certitude, and in proportion to the light God placed in their hearts. Their custodian (*qayyim*) in all of that is *al-'aql*, which God provided them. Thus, in proportion to that [finite measure of intelligence endowed them by God] the worker among them labors and rises in degrees (*yartafi'u fi l-darajat*).' (This narrative opens a window onto the teachings of 2nd century ascetic mystics who gathered on the island colony of 'Abbadan below Basrah to pursue their devotional exercises under the direction of 'Abd al-Wahid b. Zayd (d.150/767, a disciple of al-Hasan al-Basri).

The context of this narrative must be placed within an ancient trajectory of religious speculation upon the divine Throne as locus of first-born Wisdom (Heb. *Hokhmah*, Gk. *Sophia*), with this Islamic interiorizing of previous mythic elements exemplifying a process of 'reflective mythology' placing older thought currents onto a higher more rational plane within the context of the Islamic revealed framework. Such a transposition is a marked feature of early Islamic *'aql* creation narratives, constituting an archaic stage in the elaboration of a 'narrative theology' exploiting mythic motifs for didactic, doctrinal, and spiritual intent.<sup>17</sup>

10. "*awwalu makhalaqa llahu l-'aqla, thumma qala la-hu aqbil!* /The first that God created—the Intellect ['intelligence reason']. Then He said to him, 'Face forward!'..." This transformation over two centuries later of the 1st century narrative "*lamma khalaqa lla hu l-'aqla*," was frequently ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad, but never as an authentically transmitted *hadith* introduced by a proper *isnad* / chain-of-authorities. This narrative became the subject of heated debate and controversy for centuries. It was exploited and transformed in the service of a wide variety of ethical, philosophical, and theosophic mystic streams of thought ranging from Isma'ili and Druze cosmology, Sufi metaphysics, to *falsafah* and *'irfan*.

Certain constants are discernible in these early maxims, utterances and *hadiths* cast in the form of mythic narratives:

- *'aql* is created/*makhlūq*, and apportioned/*maqsum* or gifted/ *mawhub* among humans by God. This theme of the divine distribution of various shares of inborn intelligence among humanity often stressed its inequitable distribution some surpass others (*tafdil, tafawut al- 'uqul*).
- *'aql* is an innate trait of the native human constitution (*gharizah, sajiyyah, jibillah ...*). The conjunction of 'trait' (*khuluq*) and 'physique' (*khalq*) is central to the leading position of *'aql* as the chief of human moral traits, portrayed as "the commander of his troops/*amir junudih*." This theme embraces both an anthropological aspect - the natural aptitude and scope of intelligence subject to increase or diminution - as well as the cognitive aspect of faith yielding certainty and righteous conduct, reflected in archaic Islamic maxims such as: "a person's 'ideal mode of outward behavior' lies in their 'ideal mind character' / *muru'atu l-mu'min/rajal 'aqluh;*" and "there is no 'faith practice' for one lacking 'innate moral intelligence' / *la dina li-man la 'aqla la-hu;*" and "intelligence is the guiding director of the faithful / *al- 'aqlu dalilu l-mu'min.*"
- *'aql* is the locus for comprehension understanding of speech, preeminently the divine address to humans mediated in scriptural revelation. (Recall the ancient nexus of wisdom with: tongue1 earg'heart mind'.) This axiomatic aspect of intelligence lies behind the Hearing Formula - "Listen! and Understand! / *isma'u wa i'qilu*" or "Take Heed and Comprehend! / *ihfazu wa 'u*" ubiquitous in Near Eastern Wisdom teachings including pre-Islamic sages, the Qur'an, and among the early Muslim Sages (*hukama' & 'uqala'*). *'Aql* is thus a pre-requisite for reception of the guidance mediated through God's speech in the Qur'an. This crucial aspect gave rise to the widespread motto of the early Sages: "*man 'aqala 'an Allah* /one who comprehends of God [His revealed admonitions and guidance]." It was elaborated further within the forensic notion of God's 'decisive argument' / *hujjah* against humans, possessing an important function in human moral obligation (*taklif*). It was this fundamental aspect of *'aql* as 'comprehension of speech' that more than any other feature facilitated the eventual integration of the early notions on intelligence with metaphysical ideas of 'intellect' derived from the Hellenic conception of *nous* (compare: *nutq* / 'speech reason').
- *'aql* affords a role for human intelligence, a role providentially intended by the Creator, perhaps even a synergistic role. The Qur'anic data promoted a vision of an intelligible cosmos susceptible of apprehension by individual cognizing organisms whose perceptions of meaning are necessary for the realization of the ultimate purpose of creation. This Qur'anic teaching represents a rupture with old Arab views, providing a new orientation with profound consequences for Islamic religious thought and practice.

• There is a stress on moral reformation, repentant self-struggle and self-scrutiny (*muhasabat al-nafs*), and upon the cultivation of interior ethical spiritualizing virtues. The gist of this early religious understanding of *'aql* is well captured in the summary statement by al-Sadiq who defined *al-'aql* to be “that by which the All-Merciful is worshipped and by which Paradise is earned/ma *'ubida bi-hi l-Rahman wa uktusiba bi-hi l-Jinan.*”<sup>18</sup>

These and related motifs comprise the physiognomy of a social, religious and psycho ethical understanding of intelligence, sheltered under the pavilion of Qur'anic givens and further promoted in the early Muslim appropriation of wisdom teachings in their immediate environment, primarily old Arab, Biblicic, and Iranian. The sapiential background of specific early Islamic *'aql* notions remains largely overlooked by Occidental students, and unappreciated by many contemporary Muslims. At almost every step, one may adduce both Semitic and Hellenic precedents for specific components. However, the idea of God as one who speaks is a notion without parallel in Greek philosophic thought.

This was easily related to the idea of the divine reason fashioning the universe, since in Genesis 1 creation was depicted as the result of God's speaking. The Jew Philo of Alexandria was the first to link God's speaking with the Stoic doctrine of the 'reason principle'/*logos*, and this was taken up and extended by the Christian Fathers. [These *'aql* notions contributed to the parallel unfolding among early Shi'i and Sufi thinkers of the notion of the Muhammadan Light/*al-Nur al-Muhammadi*, eventually unfolding a cosmic metaphysic integrating the Qur'anic givens of the Pen and Tablet, and the angelic or sanctified Spirit/*Ruh al-Qudus* with the pre-cosmic 'Reality of Muhammad'. The ancient association in Semitic religions of pre-existent Wisdom with God's Throne and Light, which are shown here to have been a feature of proto-Sufi and Imami *'aql* speculations by no later than the mid-2nd century H, could have prepared the ground for the emergence of the idea of the Muhammadan Light as cosmic Mind Intellect.

The subsequent reception of the philosophers' First Intellect (*al-'aql al-awwal*) into Islamic religious speculations beginning from the late 3rd/9th century, may well have benefited from the preceding mingling of Heavenly Wisdom with *'aql*. At least the preparation for such a reception within certain circles becomes more understandable when viewed through the lens of these 2<sup>nd</sup> century *'aql* speculations. The fact that the earlier *falasifah* (al-Kindi, al-Farabi) are not attested to have explicitly invoked the *Aql* narrative in support of their appropriation of Hellenic philosophic teachings on First Intellect, lends credence to this possibility. What can be demonstrated is that the first Muslim philosophers who consciously made use of the *Aql* narrative were the Iranians Ahmad Ibn Miskawayh (d. 421/1030) and Abu 'Ali Ibn Sina (d. 428/1037)].

Our concise indication of the scope of the early Islamic *'aql* notions requires some appreciation for the historical context. While it is not our intention here to dwell in depth on this context<sup>19</sup>,

brief remarks are in order, particularly in light of the prevailing misconceptions over the significance of this term in early *hadith*. In the literary works of Muslim humanism and religioethics (*adab and akhlaq*), the inborn virtue or innate talent of intelligence reason was praised in writings or chapters under the rubric ‘*fi fadli l-‘aql / the surpassing merit of intelligence*’. We should again emphasize that early Muslim sages viewed ‘*aql* to be the chief or leading trait, often placing it at the head of listings of moral traits - ten or one hundred ‘virtuous traits’/*khisal* - as “the commander of his troops.”

The earliest surviving narrative reports written down in compilations during the course of a century (roughly 180–280 H) within at least seven works<sup>20</sup> attest to the importance of this primary stage of development. Several factors intervened to obscure this original Islamic religio-ethical comprehension of ‘*aql*. Probably the most damaging event leading to the deflection or mitigation of early ‘*aql* teachings was their almost total repudiation by the Sunni tradents or ‘Guardians of Tradition’, the *ashab al-hadith*, who fiercely resisted the trend to present these teachings as possessing genuine Prophetic authority.<sup>21</sup> Fortunately, the same Sunni critics faithfully recorded many of these narratives in their collections of ‘weak’ or ‘spurious’ traditions (*da‘if & mawdu‘*) and in compilations on the merits and demerits of transmitters (*jarh wa ta‘dil*). For Sunnis it was primarily among ascetic mystic or proto- Sufi circles wherein these teachings were cultivated.

In marked contrast the Imami Shi‘ah preserved a number of like narratives through separate ‘lines-of-transmission’/*riwayat* from their Husaynid ‘Alid imams, placing them at the forefront of their ethical and theological teachings. The presence of these narratives among separate circles should be understood as pointing to the common matrix of tradition and to their early origin. Iraq appears to have been the primary locale for the intensive religious development of the cluster of ‘*aql* notions, within the circles stemming from the great Successor al-Hasan al-Basri, or in those around the seminal imams Muhammad al-Baqir and Ja‘far al-Sadiq. These circles constituted the cognitive elites of the early Muslim community, viewing the divinely provisioned trait of innate human intelligence as crucial to the religious enterprise and actively contributing to faith certainty, salvation and spiritual insight.

The centrality of ‘intelligence reason’ for Islamic Ethics /*akhlaq* unfolds out of the central insight that the human volitional impulse arises within us prompted by our own understanding, and directed by the reception of divine guidance from without. As one of its most basic functions, ‘intelligence reason’ energizes the efficacy of ‘conscience’, thereby possessing a conative or volitional force since without the native intelligence created in us by God no ethical response is possible. This insight is ultimately responsible for the great emphasis put on reason as the condition for valid ‘moral obligation’/*taklif* among the Mu‘tazili and Ash‘ari theologians.

More significantly, human reception of divine guidance through revelation depends ultimately upon the efficacy and integrity of our reasoning—principle or intelligence. Without the divine provision of reason, humans would be incapable of comprehending and properly responding to God’s guidance. And the more abundant is an individual’s native endowment of reason, then the greater is the possibility for the individual to attain a larger magnitude of understanding and thereby realize a higher level of response. The unfolding of Islamic meditations on the role of reason in religious and spiritual experience flow in one way or another from this master idea.

One major trajectory of development held that there exists a direct proportion between the efforts of individuals who attain understanding, and the measure of intelligence—understanding divinely allotted to them. *‘Aql* was conceived as an individual’s ‘custodian’/*qayyim* whose individual allotment shapes obedience and the achievement of certainty/*yaqin* in the performance of deeds, enabling one to advance in degrees/*darajat*.<sup>22</sup> This trajectory fed into the emerging notions concerning the hierarchy of saints (*al-awliya*). Another major trajectory clustered around the narratives on the creation and empowerment of intelligence reason, all being elaborations of the *Aqbil* report, the controversial *hadith*: “When God had created the intelligence, He said to him, ‘Face forward!’...”- including the motifs of Light, the Throne, the Pen/*al-qalam*, and the materiality of *‘aql*.

For example, the materiality of *‘aql* as developed in early sources centered upon portraying the Prophet Muhammad as being “the weightiest in understanding wisdom/*arjahu ‘aqlan*.” This took the form of depicting the one hundred, or the one thousand, ‘created measures’/*qisam* of intelligence reason, of which Muhammad was endowed with nine hundred ninety-nine, the remaining one portion being distributed among the rest of humanity. Perhaps the first to mention this idea was the pupil of ‘Abdallah ibn ‘Abbas, the Kufan *mawla* Sa‘id b. Jubayr (executed 95/714), who was actually recounting an earlier notion:<sup>23</sup> It has reached me that *al-‘aql* was divided into a thousand parts. Muhammad was granted nine hundred ninety-nine parts, and his community was given only one part. Likewise the prophets before him, save that which God excelled Muhammad with - for God elected the prophets on account of their *‘aql*.

The thrust of such material distribution of intelligence involves the issue of reward and punishment, allowing for degrees of human achievement and increasing levels of insight. If there exists a set amount of intelligence in creation equally divided among all beings (eg. One kilogram) then every individual would possess an infinitesimal portion of a gram. However, some individuals have even less than that, while others have been endowed with several grams or more.<sup>24</sup> From this ensues the corresponding reality of lesser or greater degrees in Paradise underlying the doctrine of Sainthood /*wilayah* as it was first elaborated among Iraqi and Syrian ascetic mystic circles (the *salihun* & *zuhhad*..., later termed *sufi* ) and by the Husaynid ‘Alid *imams*.

A central dimension of this unfolding is linked to the notion of ‘dissimilarity’ or ‘surpassingness’ (*tafdil*, *tafadul*, or *tafawut al-nas fi l-‘uqul*), namely the degrees of the innate scope of cognitive illumination within a light mysticism. The *tafdili* and/or the predestinarian positions most often upheld the reality of intentional inequities in divine distribution of the created measures of ‘*aql*. This has always been the general position of Traditionalist Muslims, including the Hanbali school. Both Traditionalists and Sufis viewed it to be an innate endowment or ‘inborn trait’/*gharizah*, linking it with *fitrah* /the primordial human constitution. This stress on the innate dissimilarities or inborn inequities in human intelligence and the variable capacity of the individual ‘*uqul* probably reflects early Islamic meditation on and mitigation of widespread determinist views. The 3rd/9th century Central Asian theosophist, al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi, termed the mother-lode of understanding-perceptivity as “the Omni-Intelligence/*al-‘aql alakbar*,” declaring the science of its distribution to be a divine mystery. The 5th/11th century philosopher, Ibn Sina, addressed this issue but with differing assumptions in his discussion of the ‘*sirr al-qadar* /the secret of the divine measuring-out’. The greatest master Muhyi l-Din Ibn al-‘Arabi took up and elaborated the ‘*ilm al-qismah* /science of the divine apportioning’ of *al-‘aql al-akbar*, which he also termed “*al-‘aql al-akthar* / the Most-Abundant Intelligence.”

The notion of God’s unequal allotment of discrete portions of intelligence also had important consequences for the theology of the sages. The strict *qadari* position (perhaps first exemplified only among certain Khariji and so-called Murji’i<sup>25</sup> exponents, and then later developed among the Mu‘tazilah) was that all persons possess the same equal endowment. It is significant that the *tafdili* understanding of intelligence was of no importance for the Mu‘tazilah, whose emphasis on ‘*aql* as prerequisite for cognizance of God in terms of innate human knowledge shared equally by all and as the basis of moral obligation, led them to a ‘flat’ view of natural intelligence. The classical school of Ash‘ari theologians also upheld this position, given that they also defined ‘*aql* in terms of necessary innate knowledge. For the earlier Ash‘ari *mutakallimun*, ‘*aql* is therefore an ‘accident’/ *‘arad*. It was al-Raghib al-Isfahani and then al-Ghazali who promoted the philosophical understanding of ‘*aql*/intellect as an ‘immaterial substance’/*jawhar* independent of matter, which was to become dominant among the later Ash‘ari philosophically-tinted theologians.

There ultimately emerged a creative synthesis of theology with *falsafah* or *hikmah* as well as Sufism /*tasawwuf*, signaling the full bloom of Islamic intellectual genius. This fruit of mature Islamic ‘rational spirituality’ was initiated by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d.505/1111) through his synthesis of Shafi‘i legal theory and Ash‘ari theological doctrines within a spiritual psychology and higher metaphysic containing speculative and experiential elements drawn from both Philosophy and Sufism. Ghazali’s pioneering integration of these heretofore antagonistic components marked the first appearance of a theologically grounded trans-rational metaphysic in Islamic thought.

Islamic thinkers and exponents always sought an equilibrium between the logico-cognitive processes of rational argumentation, proof and systematic thought, and the faith-based components bearing on sacred authority, moral intention and responsibility, and the operation of conscience and perfection of perceptive insight. Reason was fixed within proper bounds in order to properly fulfill its role in human cognition, where the Heart Mind is the true center of perceptive meaning and action. Unfettered reason alienated from the deeper aspects of the autonomous human being results in dis-equilibrium - with severe consequences for humanity and society now being experienced today.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> We are preparing a detailed lexical-conceptual examination of the development of 'aql notions, entitled *'Aql Mind Cognition In Early Islamic Wisdom*.

<sup>2</sup> Michelle Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1972), appendix 'The Discourse on language'.

<sup>3</sup> See the study by 'Abdullah al-'Arawi, *Mafhum al-'Aql: Maqalah fi l-Mufaraqat / The Concept of Reason: an essay in distinctions* (Casablanca & Beirut, Markaz al-Thaqafah al-'Arabi, 1996); and the less rigorous work by Muhammad 'Abid al-Jabiri, *Naqd al-'Aql al-'Arabi / Critique of the Arab Mind*, 3 vols., esp. vol. I *Takwin al-'Aql al-'Arabi / Genesis of the Arab Mind* (Beirut, Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1983; 3rd pr. 1994), along with its critique by George Tarabishi, *Nazariyyat al-Aql /The Theory of 'Mind': Naqd Naqd al-'Aql al-'Arabi* (Beirut, Dar al-Saqi, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> 'Abd al-Majid Najjar, *Khilafat al-Insan bayna l-Wahy wa l-'Aql* (2nd ed., Herndon, VA, International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1993) 89ff.; Fatimah I. M. Isma'il, *al-Qur'an wa l-Nazar al-'Aqli* (Herndon, VA, IIIT, 1993). Compare the work by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *al-Ittijah al-'Aqli fi l-Tafsir/The Rational Trend in Exegesis* (3rd pr., Casablanca & Beirut, Markaz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi, 1996), a study of Mu'tazili notions of inimitability of Qur'anic discourse in their exegesis.

<sup>5</sup> For the contrast between the 'brain' and 'heart' conceptions, see our remarks in 'Between Wisdom and Reason: Aspects of 'Aql (Mind-Cognition) in Early Islam,' *Islamica* [U.K.] 1 (1999) 33– 49, on 34–35. On the gulf between contemporary notions and the Islamic philosophical legacy, see Muhammad al-Misbahi, *Tarikh al-Wujud wa l-'Aql* (Beirut, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1995) 27–66 *al-'aql, al-'ilm wa l-insan: mawqifuna wa mawqif alturath*; and cf. Muhammad al-Zayid, 'Aql [Raison – Reason - Vernunft],' in *al-Muwsu'at al-Falsafiyat al-'Arabiyyah*, ed. Ma'an Ziyadah (Beirut, Ma'had al-Inma' al-'Arabi, 1986) I 596a–603a.

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent survey of Muslim design arguments, see H. A. Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (New York & Oxford, 1987, p.p. 213–36, & p. 146f. 'Proofs from Composition'.

<sup>7</sup> Recently Riad A. Kassis has studied the islamization process for a few old Arab proverbial sayings; see his *The Book of Proverbs and Arabic Proverbial Works* (Leiden, Brill, 1999) 250–258 'Theological and Literary development in Arabic proverbs'.

<sup>8</sup> *maqul* was early employed as a verbal noun (*masdar mimi*) synonymous with *aql*.

<sup>9</sup> Invoked by *Jahili* sages like ‘Amr b. Ma‘dīkarib al-Zubaydi (A. Z. Safwat, *Jamharat Khutab al-‘Arab* I 63), and by Damrah b. Damrah al-Tamimi & Aktham b. Sayfi (*ibid.* 66 & 137). Umayyad Caliph Sulayman b. ‘Abd al Malik (rg. 96–99/715 – 717) cited anonymous verses: “*wa ma l-mar’u illa l-asgharani lisanuh wa ma‘quluh wa jismu khalqun musawwaru*” (Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *al-‘Iqd al-Farid* II 241) cf. verses by either Zuhayr b. Abi Sulma or Ziyad al-A‘jam cited by Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan, in Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, *al-Imta‘ wa l-Mu‘anasah*, ed. A. Amin & A. al-Zayn, II 144. Echoed in verses by the Basran *zindiq* fond of *hikmah*, Salih b. ‘Abd al-Quddus (executed 167/ 783–4); Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *Bahjat al-Majalis* I 539, & *Baghdad* IX 304. For the setting of this proverb’s origin, see the references gathered by R. A. Kassis, *The Book of Proverbs* p.p. 117–8.

<sup>10</sup> See eg. Ibn Abi Shaybah, *Musannaf* XIII 214 16141; Ibn Hanbal, *Kitab al-Zuhd*, ed. M. Jalal Sharaf, I 167; and cf. B. Heller & N. Stillman, *EI2* V 812 [parallels to Aesop].

<sup>11</sup> For orientation on this second generation of Muslims and their important role in transmission of *hadith*, see S. A. Spector, ‘Tabi‘un’ *EI2* X 28b–30a.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn Abi l-Dunya, *al-‘Aql wa Fadluhu* 35 §21; Abu Nu‘aym al- Isfahani, *Hilyat al-Awliya* ’ IV 40–1; Ibn Fatik, *Mukhtar al- Hikam wa Mahasin al-Kalim*, ed. ‘A.-R. Badawi (Madrid, 1955) 271; Ibn al-Jawzi, *Akhbar al-Adhkiya*’ 8. This maxim occurs also with the wording “... *afdala min fiqh in fi l-din*,” where the archaic signification of *fiqh* (‘understanding comprehension’ regarding faith obedience) is synonymous with ‘*aql*’; eg. *Hilyat* II p.p. 192–3.

<sup>13</sup> Transmitted by the Syrian Murji ‘i tradent Baqiyyah b. al-Walid al-Kala ‘i (d.197/812-3); see Nabia Abbot, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri* (Chicago, 1957–1972) II 222 lines 12– 13.

<sup>14</sup> The polarities ‘*aql* vs. *humq* or *hawa*, and *hilm* vs. *jahl*, appear to be more archaic than ‘*aql* vs. *jahl*. The two former pairs are rooted in old Arab usage, while the latter reflects post-Qur’anic employment; further, see our ‘*Aql in Early Islamic Wisdom*.

<sup>15</sup> al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi, *Nawadir al-Usul fi Ma‘rifat A hadith al-Rasul*, ed. A. ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Sa‘ih & al-Sayyid al-Jumayli (Cairo, Dar al-Dayyan li-l-Turath, 1408/1988) II 206, on p.148–149 (an extract preserving certain original details); fuller text in Ibn Hajar, *Matalib al-‘Aliyah* III 19–20 2764, and in Ibn‘Arraq al- Kinani, *Tanzih al-Shari‘ah* I 219–20; also extracted in *Ihya’* I.1/ v.I pp.123–124.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *I Kings* 4:29, regarding Solomon’s wisdom; ‘grains of sand’ was an old trope for an unlimited number.

<sup>17</sup> See the interesting study by Claude Gilliot treating the *qalam* and *'aql* creation narratives, 'Mythe et Théologie: Calame et Intellect, Prédestination et Libre Arbitre', *Arabica* 45 (July 1998) 151– 192, esp. p.151 & 185–189 on myth and theology; sadly, Gilliot utterly fails to appreciate the primary ethico-theological basis of the *'aql* narratives (p.172–185). Other significant utterances (*aqwal*) are assigned to Ibn Salam, eg. a report in Abu Ya'la al- Mawsili's *Kitab al-Tafsir* : "ma khalaqa llahu khalqan akrama 'alayhi min Muhammadin S.../God created no creature more cherished by Him than Muhammad...", specifying that the Prophet is greater than Angels Michael and Gabriel or the sun and moon; cited by Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmu' Fatawa Shaykh al-Islam*, ed. al-'Asami al-Najdi (al-Riyad 1991) IV 357.

<sup>18</sup> al-Kulayni, *Usul, I kitab al-'aql wa l-jahl* pp.11-13.

<sup>19</sup> Details are provided in our forthcoming study *'Aql In Early Islamic Wisdom*. See the overview in 'Between Wisdom and Reason.

<sup>20</sup> Namely the *'aql* books of the Iraqis Maysarah b. 'Abd Rabbih al- Dawraqi, Dawud b. al-Muhabbar al-Qahdhami, 'Abd al-'Aziz b. Abi Raja', Sulayman b. 'Isa al-Sijzi, al-Harith al-Mahasibi (extant), Ibn Abi l-Dunya (extant), and the Qummi scholar Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Khalid al-Barqi.

<sup>21</sup> The reasons are complex, and are dealt with in our study, 'The *Kitab al-'Aql* by Dawud b. al-Muhabbar (d.206/821) and its rejection by Sunni Tradents,' *Arabica* [Paris], forthcoming.

<sup>22</sup> See above n.14.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn Wathimah al-Farisi, *Bad' al-Khalq wa Qisas al-Anbiya'*, ed. R. G. Khoury, 128.

<sup>24</sup> As for the objection that if the objective quantity of *'aql* remains constant, and yet the number of humans is always increasing-this would not be valid for those who upheld the pre-creation of souls before bodies, since the number of souls is also fixed from the start.

<sup>25</sup> We mean the theological grouping labeled 'Qadari Ghaylaniyyah', whose doctrines were attributed to the early Qadari activist Ghaylan b. Muslim al-Dimashqi (executed 125/742). Ghaylan's ideas were supported politically by the Umayyad Caliph Yazid III in the Syrian revolt which brought him to the throne for a brief period in 127/ 744; see W. M. Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh, 1973) pp. 85–88, 121, 125; W. Madelung, 'Murdji'a' *EI2* VII 606b.