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## THE CONCEPT OF THE INTELLECT: AN ENCYCLOPAEDIC GLANCE THROUGH AL-TABARI, AL-GHAZALI, AND ABDUH

MOHAMMED MUNEE'R DEEN OLODO AL-SHAFI'I<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Usuluddin, Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies (FKI), University Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Gong Badak Campus, Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu, Malaysia.

\*Corresponding author: [mmolodo@unisza.edu.my](mailto:mmolodo@unisza.edu.my)

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### Abstract

*It is historically evident that the main arguments regarding the intellect and revelation is basically about which of the two supersedes the other and which is more superior. This paper looks mainly at the concept and understanding of the intellect through some dictionaries and in the major works of the great scholars. The paper further delves into the cognates there are for the intellect in the Qur'an to strengthen the arguments of the scholars. The work is encyclopaedic though, it should not be misconstrued as depending on solely on 'encyclopaedias' as it generally connotes; it is encyclopaedic in the sense that it deals with major works of the selected scholars.*

**Keywords:** Concept, the Intellect, al-Tabari, al-Ghazali, and Abduh, Islamic, obligation, superiority

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## INTRODUCTION

Everything has a pillar. The pillar of any given community, society or group of people is education. The pillars of this education are serious intellectuals/scholars who strive day and night to put things in their right places and orders. The pillar that supports the activities of these intellectuals is a vital tool that governs human life in all its spheres. This vital tool is *al-Ĥaqql* (the Intellect), that physically invisible but undoubtedly noble and an integral part of every human being.

*Al-Ĥaqql* (the Intellect) is the distinguished quality that differentiates man from other living creatures. The importance of *al-Ĥaqql* in Islam is no less than the importance of other obligations such as prayers and purification. For example, *al-ĤalĖt* (the daily obligatory prayer) is the pillar of Islamic religion; whoever observes it observes the pillar of his *al-dĖn* and

whoever ignores it destroys the pillar of his *al-dĒn*. Similarly, *al-wuĒĒ* (obligatory purification) is the pillar of *al-ĪalĒt*; the means with which one engages in communication with one's Lord. Based on *fiqh* maxim, all means such as *al-wuĒĒ* needed for observing an obligation become in themselves obligations.

So, *al-Ŋaql* is one such important means for understanding what is obligatory, legal, prohibited, allowed, disallowed, liked, disliked, necessary, unnecessary and so on. Hence, intellect, as suggested and affirmed by MaĪmĒd ŊAbbĒs al-ŊAqqĒd in his *al-Ŋaql FarĒlah IslĒmiyyah*, is an Islamic obligation. The importance of the intellect is self-evident throughout the theological, philosophical, logical, historical and intellectual discussions in Islamic thought.

*Al-Ŋaql* and all its cognates are so vast that they cannot be addressed adequately in just a single volume in the form of the present paper. This paper discusses the concept of *al-Ŋaql* according to ImĒm al-ŲabarĒ, ImĒm al-GhazĒĒ and ImĒm ŊAbduh.

In the history of Islamic thought, thinkers, theologians, ideologists, rationalists and philosophers such as al-ŲabarĒ, AbĒ NaĪr al-FĒrĒbĒ, Ibn SĒna, al-GhazĒĒ, Ibn Rushd, Ibn KhaldĒn, JamĒl al-dĒn al-AfghĒnĒ, and MuĪammad ŊAbduh, to mention but a few, all applied intellect, in accordance with revelation, to deal with religious and intellectual issues of their age.

Historically, the main arguments regarding the intellect and revelation is basically about which of the two supersedes the other and which is more superior. Although revelation is considered more superior to the intellect because it includes intellectuality in reality, the intellect as Allah's creation preceded Divine scriptures. This is so because the intellect is the foundation for the comprehension of Divine revelations (*waĪy*) in the Books and the Universe. Revelation came to guide the intellect, which had been divinely prepared to comprehend the message. The *Ŋaql* had been pre-informed of the arrival of revelation, hence its readily acceptance, without any objection, of what was brought by Divine revelation.

## STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The importance and significance of the intellect in Islam has been an age-long discussion among scholars, traditional, philosophical or modern. Discussing the intellect in the light of the encyclopediac works of the selected scholars would be valuable in understanding its concept.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the light of this paper, the following distinctive questions, leading to its objectives and significance, are addressed:

- i. What is the intellect, and how is it defined in various dictionaries?
- ii. How do scholars view the intellect and what are their religious perspectives concerning it?
- iii. What does the Qur'an say about the intellect, and how does it relate between the intellect and the revelation?

## METHOD

This study is based on a library research, employing suitably, a qualitative approach. In other words, the main method of data collection for this study is through the library research, and the methodology is the study and review of primary and secondary sources, documents from journals, books, and official documents including any report relating to the concept of the intellect. The study uses, comparatively and analytically, the Qur'anic interpretations of the intellect and its cognates found among the scholars.

## SOME ENCYCLOPAEDIC DEFINITIONS AND MEANINGS OF THE INTELLECTUAL-*ÛABARÊ*, *AL-GHAZÉLÊ*, AND *ÑABDUH*

There are arguments and debates among scholars, scientists and philosophers, from the ancient to the contemporary, about the concept of *al-Ñaq̣l*. The arguments and debates are mainly about the reality of the term *al-Ñaq̣l* and its meanings. Is *al-Ñaq̣l* (used here as the intellect) to be seen and interpreted as *al-Ñilm* (knowledge/science) or it is to be seen as *al-qalb* (the heart)? Is it a physical or metaphysical object?

Alternatively, is it the same as *al-lubb* (inner/central part of the brain), *al-Íikmah* (wisdom), *al-fahm* (understanding) and *al-fikr* (thought)? In *LisÉn al-Ñarab* of Ibn ManḌËr (Ibn ManḌËr, n.d, vol. 5, part 34, pp. 3046-3050), *al-Ñaq̣l* (intellect, knowledge, reason, judgement, sense, mind, memory, prudence, wisdom, understanding, and genius (Catafago, n.d, p. 245)) is referred to as *al-Íijr<sup>1</sup> wa al-nuhÉ<sup>2</sup>* (intelligence, prudence (Salmon, 1978, p. 1115 and Catafago, n.d, p. 442), intelligence, understanding, reason, mind and intellect (Wehr, 1980, p. 1005<sup>3</sup>). The opposite of *al-Ñaq̣lis al-Íumq* (stupidity, dullness, foolishness, senselessness (Salmon, 1978, p. 157 and Catafago, n.d, p. 131), stupidity, silliness, foolishness, fatuosity, dumbity, idiotic and folly (Wehr, 1980, p. 206).

The intellect is also referred to as that maintaining stability and accuracy in matters relating to worldly and eternal affairs (*wa al-Ñaq̣l al-tathabbut fÊ al-umËr*) (Ibn ManḌËr, p. 3046). Furthermore, it is said that the intellect is the heart and the heart is the intellect (*al-Ñaq̣l: al-qalb, al-qalb: al-Ñaq̣l*) (ibid). They are two cognate words used interchangeably. *Al-Ñaq̣l* also denotes to forbid from being led into destructions (ibid).

<sup>1</sup>The study has thus far not found a dictionary, literary, linguistic, or otherwise, that translates and interprets *al-Íijr* as reason, intellect, mind, soul, or brain. What most famous dictionaries, such as Hans Wehr's *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, H. Anthony Salmone's *An Advanced Learner's Arabic-English Dictionary*, and Joseph Catafago's *An Arabic and English Literary Dictionary*, have in common, in this regard, is the definition of *al-Íijr* as restriction, limitation, curtailing, interdiction, preclusion, compartment, confinement, revocation... and so on. Although these meanings are some of the literal translations of *al-Ñaq̣l*, they do not reflect the meaning of *al-Íijr* as the intellect. In Arabic language there are several references relating the word as *al-Ñaq̣l*. This may be so, basically because the Quran (SËrah al-Fajr: 5) mentions it, and most exegetes interpret it thus. By this the conception here is to round up the meaning to 'restricting oneself to do good and forbidding it from doing the vice'.

<sup>2</sup> *Al-nuhÉ* is a noun form of *nahw* meaning intelligence and prudence, they are both *muÑtal al-Ékhir*, and otherwise it also means prohibition and interdiction.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted here that Hans Wehr directly translated *al-nuhÉ* as the intellect which is cognatus to *al-Ñaq̣l*.

Those were some definitions from dictionaries. To examine some meaning it connotes among the scholars, we will be sufficed with three scholars here.

A careful study of the works and writings of al-ʿUbarî, al-Ghazālî, and ṢAbduh reveals that they all value *al-ṢNaql* as an instrument for understanding and comprehending Divine rules in nature. In other words, none of them have ever played down the importance of the intellect, although they may have been construed to have different interpretations of it. Al-ʿUbarî stands clear of any influence of the other two on his thought. Al-Ghazālî must have read and studied al-ʿUbarî's works. While the influences of both al-ʿUbarî and al-Ghazālî on ṢAbduh's thought cannot be ultimately denied, although the era in which ṢAbduh lived was more complex than the eras of the other two. ṢAbduh lived in a period when religious intellectual understanding of the western civilization was highly needed. Whilst al-ʿUbarî's thought echoes the traditional Islamic views of the intellect, al-Ghazālî's revives the Islamic intellectual activities from being eroded.

According to al-ʿUbarî, the purpose of endowing the intellect is to serve as concise evidence on the Day of Reckoning. The Prophets and Messengers, as ambassadors between God and men, must be blessed with extraordinary mind and intellect in order that no one will say "*this is not but a man like you who eats from that which you eat and drinks from that which you drink. If thou follow then a man like you, you are then of those who are lost*" (see Ibn Jarîr al-ʿUbarî, 1400A.H./1980C.E., vol. 1, pp. 2-4). According to al-ʿOḡbî, the main reason for dwelling in hell-fire is attributed to lack of beneficial intellect or the improper usage of the beneficial intellect. This is clear in the interpretation of verse ten of *Sḡrah* al-Mulk: "*law kḡnat lanḡ Ṣnuḡl nantafiṢ bihḡ...*" (see al-ʿOḡbî, 1980, vol. 3, p. 417), ("if we had beneficial intellects..." we would not have been condemned to the hell-fire) whereas al-ʿOḡwî says a reflecting intellect (*ṢNaqlun tufakkir*) (al-ʿOḡwî, 1415A.H./1995C.E., vol. 6, p. 143) properly leads to the right path. Al-ʿUbarî's understanding and interpretation of the intellect is purely traditional<sup>4</sup> since the challenges his era faced was not as severe as in the later periods.

Generally, al-Ghazālî is in no way opposed to the power of *al-ṢNaql*. All he is saying is that *al-ṢNaql* cannot be the sole arbiter in mortals' affairs, and cannot be wholly reliable, for it is also dependent on revelation, which in turn has its precedence linked to the Divine root. To him, *al-ṢNaql* is not but an instrument to properly understand and act upon orders given in revelation, and when properly employed it does not contradict that which is revealed. In his magnum opus *ʿIḡyḡ ṢNulḡm al-dḡn* he calls it *nḡr* (light) with reference to it in *ḡyat al-nḡr* in the Qur'an.

<sup>4</sup> The Qur'anic interpretation of al-ʿUbarî is regarded as traditional because it is based on the interpretation of certain Qur'anic verses with other verses of the Qur'an, with the Prophetic traditions and the guided opinions of the four rightly guided *khulafḡ* (R.ṢA) of the Prophet (S.ṢA.W). (See Fḡrḡqḡ, I. H. Azad, *The Tarjuman al-Qur'an: A Critical Analysis of Maulana Abu al-Kalḡm Azad's Approach to the Understanding of the Qur'an*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1982), pp. 5-7; ṢAli al-ṢAwwḡ, *al-ʿUḡbḡabḡnḡ wa Manhajuhḡ fḡ Tafsḡrih al-Mḡẓḡn*, (Tehran: MuṢḡwiniyyah al-Riyḡsah li al-Ṣalḡqḡt al-Duwaliiyyah, 1985), p. 125; and Murḡalḡ Muḡahhari, "Understanding the Uniqueness of the Qur'an," *al-Tawhḡd* (1987), pp. 17.). Al-Ghazālî is a traditional scholar, but since this study is not related to his supposed interpretation of the glorious Qur'an, he is not regarded as one; he is more preferred as a philosopher and *mutakallim* through the study of his other works that the present study has accessed. ṢAbduh's approach is clear as he is studied through his modern Qur'anic interpretation.

On the importance of the intellect, al-Ghaz  l   cites the Prophet as saying: “O ye men! Know Allah and be ruled by [the] intellect, then ye will know what ye have been enjoined and ye have been forbidden. Know ye that [the] intellect is your glory before Allah. He who obeyeth Allah, although his looks may be ugly, his rank lowly, his station modest, and his appearance shabby, is intelligent; but he who disobeyeth Allah, although his looks may be good, his rank exalted, his station noble, his appearance fair, and his power of speech sharp and fluent, the same is ignorant. For the apes and the pigs are, in the sight of God, saner than he who disobeyeth. Therefore be not deceived by the honour which the men of this world receive: verily they are of those who are doomed... The first thing which Allah created was the intellect. On creating it Allah ordered it saying, 'Come forth', and it came forth. He then ordered it saying, 'Return', and it returned. Thereupon Allah said, 'By My power and glory I have created nothing more reverent towards Me than thee. Through thee I take and through thee I give, through thee I reward and through thee I punish” (al-Ghaz  l  , trans. Nabih Amin Faris, 1962, p. 222).<sup>5</sup>

Referring to the intellect as an instrument, he quotes the Prophet as saying: “For everything there is an instrument and a tool, and the instrument of the believer is his intellect: for everything there is a mainstay, and the mainstay of man is his intellect; for everything there is a support, and the support of religion is the intellect; for every group of men there is a goal, and the goal of the worshippers is the intellect; for every people there is a missionary (who calls them to true faith), and the missionary of the devout is the intellect; for every merchant there are goods and merchandise, and the merchandise of the scholars is the intellect; for every house there is a keeper, and the keeper of the houses of the saints is the intellect; for every ruin there is rehabilitation, and the rehabilitation of ruin is the intellect; for every man there is an offspring who bears his name and perpetuates his memory, and the offsprings of the saints, who bear their names, and perpetuate their memory, are their intellects; and finally for every journey there is a shelter, and the shelter of the believers is the intellect” (See al-Zab  d  , *It  f al-s  dah al-muttaq  n...*, 2009, vol. 1, p. 758; Mohd Kamal Hassan, 1433H/2011, p. 1; Mohd Kamal Hassan, 2011, p. 2287; Mohd. Shuhaimi bin Haji Ishak, 1430H/2009, 111-131; Douglas Crow, 2006, pp. 2-4; and Isham Pawan Ahmad, p. 148 onward).

To understand   Abduh  s views on the intellect, there is also a need to understand his personality (C. Adams, 1968, pp. 1-3). We may understand the importance he attaches to human intellect from his apparent treatment and interpretation of the word *furq  n* (*S  rah   l   Imr  n* (Q. 3): 4) unconventionally as the intellect –that which distinguishes the truth from falsehood.   Abduh is not alone in interpreting the word as such, modern and contemporary scholars such as Ahmad Zaki also interprets it as “*the Criterion of the way of truth*” (A  mad Zaki   ammad, 2008, p. 83). Thus, according to him, interpreting the Qur  an without taking into consideration its modern intellectual discourse may be problematic.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The word ‘God’ in the original translation is here replaced with the word ‘Allah’, and intellect is preceded with definite article ‘the’, and the text has been rephrased to suit the paper’s focus.

<sup>6</sup> On the methodology of   Abduh  s Qur  anic interpretation, some works have been done.   Abd al-Ghaff  r, for example, has written a comprehensive book titled *Al-im  m Mu  ammad   Abduh wa manhajuh f   al-tafs  r*,   Abd al-xal  m Jund   wrote *Al-im  m Mu  ammad   Abduh*,   Uthm  n Am  n wrote *R   d al-fikr al-M  l  : al-im  m Mu  ammad   Abduh*, and Sam  r Ab   xamd  n wrote *Al-im  m Mu  ammad   Abduh: jadaliyyah al-  aql wa al-nah  lah*, to mention but few.

Thus, it is the common position of Muslim scholars that revelation (*al-waġy*) and the intellect are not antagonistic but complementary. The former supplements the latter while the latter is explanatory to the former. The Qur'an mentions that God gave human beings minds (in this case *al-Ĥaql*) so that they could evaluate for themselves the truth and import of things (AĤmad Zaki Ĥammad, 2008, p. xvii). The Qur'an, on several occasions, enjoins believers to ponder over the creation of God employing the intellect endowed on them as an important tool, and while doing this is certain that there is bound to be differences in the way they reason. In other words, the fact that humans have independent wills for which they bear individual moral responsibility makes thinking one of those essential obligations that one cannot pass over to another (ibid). This means that: "...critical reflection cultivates modesty and honesty, the two mother traits of noble character... our reasoning ability constitutes a failsafe faculty that nullifies the dubious claim that it is a human "right" to blame others and to excuse oneself for believing wrongly about Allah and being ignorant of the good, the right, and the wholesome thing to do in virtually every situation" (ibid).

This paper valuably concludes with a glance from what the Qur'an has concerning the intellect. It would be very interestingly to state here that accurately knowing what the Qur'an says for itself is one thing, and intellectually comprehending what it means to convey, as well as fostering it into mortals' daily endeavours, is quite another.

The Qur'an as a major reference to *al-Ĥaql* has several cognate terms used with reference to the intellect and its activities. Some of these terms are *al-Ĥaql* from *taĤqilĤn*, *al-tadabbur* from *tadabbarĤn*, *al-tafakkur* from *tafakkarĤn*, *al-lubb* from *'ĤlĤ al-albĤb*, *al-tadhakkur* from *tadhakkarĤn*, *al-tabaĤur* from *ĤlĤ al-abĤĤr*, *al-nuhĤ* from *ĤlĤ al-nuhĤ*, and some others.

## CONCLUSION

The major thrust of this paper is to establish some conceptual meanings of the intellect encyclopedically, relating it to the Qura'anic perspective. This paper however cannot claim to have covered everything there is to cover about the intellect; much would be related in the next edition on the intellect and its concept.

As widely accepted, Islam is revelation-intellect-centric. The centricity is studied in the lights of the intellectuals and scholars extensive discussions.

From the above discussions, it shows importance is attached to the intellect from the ancient to the contemporary. It is highly regarded, and the Qur'an is full of references that command and exhort people to think, contemplate, and to examine the *ĤyĤt*(signs) of *Allah* in the universe (cosmological revelations). This shows that Islam values the intellect, and it is confident that there will be no contradiction between what is contained in the revelation and what can be intellectualized by man. But it doesn't place the utmost understanding and the responsibilities of the *ĤyĤt* on the capacity of the intellect. The intellect as a gift due to Divine Mercy is a source of attaining knowledge (*Ĥilm*) of the purpose of existence. Man's inability to intellectually save himself from certain, if not most, situations is an indication that the intellect does have a limit. The Qur'an, in many occasions, after telling man what to do, how to do it, and what not to do, and why not to do it, says that man still fails to comprehend or act accordingly. The Qur'an says: *aĤalĤ taĤqilĤn*, *aĤalĤ tafakkarĤn*, *aĤalĤ tazakkarĤn*... and so on



so that human beings would understand what Allah (S.W.T.) wants them to understand. Almost all Muslim scholars and thinkers, with the exception of some from among the philosophers, accept the intellect as one of the many given sources of knowledge<sup>7</sup>. They only differ in its degree of certainty. It is from their explanations and elaborations, derived from their understanding on religious matters that we can deduce their conceptions of the intellect.

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<sup>7</sup> Some other sources include, but not limited to, *maŇrifah*, *Āilm* (True vision), intellect, sense, Messenger and Inspiration.

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