

*In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.
All Praise is due unto God, the Lord of the Worlds, and may His Peace
and Blessings be upon all His Prophets and Saints.*

From Instrumental Reason to Sacred Intellect

Hamid Parsania

One of the most outstanding features of the modern world is its rationality: it underlies many of both the positive and negative aspects of modernity. Rationality has numerous levels and dimensions. Any given society develops its own special culture and civilization, depending upon which of these levels is made operative in it. The area of rationality that has become actualized in the modern world, more than any other, is one that can be termed instrumental rationality ('*aql abzari*'). This paper will initially present the different meanings, dimensions, limits and levels that have been ascribed to rationality and the rational faculty in man. It will then survey the historical formation and encroachment of instrumental rationality in the modern world, and will continue by noting some of its innate difficulties and defects. In conclusion, a solution to some of these problems will be proposed.

For man's cognitive faculty ('*aql*', reason, or intellect), various meanings have been put forth and terminologies coined [in Islamic thought]. Each one takes into consideration a certain dimension, level, or layer of the faculty in question. Some of these terms are as follows:

1. Instrumental reason ('*aql abzari*)
2. Metaphysical reason
3. Speculative reason (– *nazari*)
4. Practical reason (– '*amali*)
5. Conceptual reason (– *mafhum*)
6. Intuitive intellect (– *shuhudi*)
7. Sacred intellect (– *qudsi*)
8. Common sense (– '*urfi*)

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9. Universal intellect (– *kulli*)
10. Individual intellect (– *juzzi*)
11. Empirical reason (– *tajrubi*)
12. Intellect in potential (– *bil-quwah*)
13. Intellect in acquisition (– *bil-malakah*)
14. Intellect in act (– *bil-f'il*)
15. Acquired intellect (– *mustafad*)
16. Active intellect (– *fa'aal*)
17. First intellect (– *awwal*)
18. Horizontal and Vertical intellects

Instrumental Reason (‘*aql abzari*)

Instrumental reason and rationality is primarily geared for man's complete domination of nature. It was with this meaning of rationality in mind that Francis Bacon, in *Novum Organum*, took knowledge to be the same as power and wrote, "Human knowledge and human power meet in one." Max Weber saw instrumental rationality as one of the defining elements of Western civilization and saw Western man's behavior to be dominated by it. He held that this goal-oriented rationality, or *Zweckrational*, guided social behavior along the lines of the worldly ends within man's reach. He counted technology, industry, and bureaucracy to be the natural results and effects of the domination of rationality in this meaning.

Metaphysical Reason

Metaphysical reason or intellect strives to determine the conditions and states that apply to being itself. Metaphysical laws and axioms, though not limited to the material world, are usually applicable to material existents as well. For example, the axiom of non-contradiction or the principle of causality are relevant in the physical realm as much as in the metaphysical. Questions and issues of philosophy and ontology are the prime concern and responsibility of metaphysical reason.

Speculative Reason (‘*aql nazari*)

Speculative reason involves itself with realities outside the sphere of human volition. In scope, it is more general than metaphysical reason. This is because the latter is only a part of speculative reason, which includes issues of physics

and mathematics in its other parts, and is responsible for addressing them. As well, to the extent that it concerns the knowledge of natural and material realities, instrumental reason comes under the purview of speculative reason.

Practical Reason (*‘aql ‘amali*)

Practical reason and speculative reason are opposites, their realms of application and subjects of study being entirely distinct from one another. Practical reason engages itself with realities based upon man’s will. Do’s, don’ts, manners, personal and social rights, rules, and human organizations are all objects of attention for practical reason. The philosopher Immanuel Kant questioned the value and validity of the cognitive content of speculative reason. In spite of his skepticism about speculative reason, he attempted to defend the substantiality of practical reason. From the foregoing definitions of speculative and practical reason, it is clear that practical reason — just like speculative reason — is a faculty employed in the search for truth and reality. In this meaning, these two rationalities are two parts and domains of human knowledge. Their difference lies in the subject to which they apply themselves. Practical reason is sometimes understood to oppose the cognitive faculty. In such a case, it represents the practical faculty of man. Acts ensuing from it then become acts of beauty and grace, precisely because they conform to the dictates of human reason and intellect. Whenever practical reason is understood in this last sense, speculative reason in contrast is taken to mean the totality of man’s rational cognition. In this case, speculative reason, in addition to being opposed to man’s practical faculty, also becomes pitted against all other non-rational modes of cognition. For instance, it excludes sensuous cognition (*aisthetikon*) and its accompanying divisions of sensuous perception (*aesthesis*), imagination (*phantasia*), and memory (*mneme*).

Conceptual Reason (*‘aql mafhumi*)

Conceptual reason has an even more general meaning than both speculative reason and practical reason. Its central characteristic is that it apprehends its subjects of study by way of mental concepts. Many epistemological discussions are aware of the importance of this type of reason in acquiring knowledge of concrete reality. Kant, though, doubted the substantive content of conceptual reason and devalued its ability to understand the external world. Conceptual reason is increased and expanded by the means and methods of discursive logic.

Intuitive Intellect (*'aql shuhudi*)

Intuitive reason or intellect¹ apprehends universal and pervasive realities directly, without the mediation of mental concepts. From one perspective intuitive reason is contrasted with conceptual reason, while from another, intellectual intuition differs from both sensuous intuition (which lies below it and is sub-intellectual) and mystical intuition (which lies above it and is supra-intellectual). Sensual intuition is acquired by way of direct and unmediated contact with individual and material things, whereas its intellectual counterpart is obtained by coming face to face with universal and ubiquitous realities. Supra-intellectual intuition, according to the reports of Muslim mystics, is obtained by a vision of God's beautiful Names and His attributes.

Mind desired in stealth light from the passional fire
Then jealousy welled and nigh was the world rent asunder

The courtier desired a glimpse of the inner chamber
Thundered the voice from beyond, Whither go ye, intruder?!²

Intuitive reason is the existential root of conceptual reason. Mulla Sadra, a famous Muslim philosopher of the seventeenth century, held conceptual reason to be of a lower order than intellectual reason and the intellect.³ Kant, by explicitly denying intuitive rationality, cut off the existential and substantive roots of conceptual reason. In so doing, instead of seeing conceptual reason to be a true representation of concrete reality, he saw it as an impediment and a veil hiding it.

Sacred Intellect (*'aql qudsi*)

Sacred intellect is the highest type of intuitive intellect. The holder of this intellect is in direct and immediate contact with intellectual realities (or *intellectus* when used to denote a species of being). In expounding on the sacred intellect and its genesis, religious texts, mystics, and philosophers have been prolific. He who has a sacred intellect directly apprehends the essences and realities that others approach only by concepts and discursive demonstrations (*dianoia* and *episteme*). His apprehension of these realities can be likened to the true and prophetic dreams that some people see. According to the mystics and sages, the divine revelations made to Prophets

and the inspirations of Saints are consequences of their sacred intellects. The Peripatetic philosophers (*masha'*) call this sacred intellect '*aql mustafad* (acquired intellect). In religious texts, the teacher or medium for "teaching" and conveying the sacred intellect is the Holy Spirit — Gabriel, the divine archangel. This same medium, in philosophical terminology, is an immaterial existent that is sometimes called the Active Intellect (*intellectus agens* or *nous poietikos*).⁴

The person with sacred intellect has access to knowledge that is over and above the acquired and discursive knowledge available to others. So if metaphysical reason can prove the immateriality and eternality of the human soul, then the sacred intellect can provide the details of man's ascent and final felicity. That which is given to humanity by way of sacred intellect in the form of a decree — pertaining to conceptual reason, whether speculative or practical — is called a decree of guidance. This is because sacred intellect guides and leads the way for others towards what they themselves can acquire or become. If, on the other hand, the decree is of such a nature that it is beyond their reach, then it is a decree of origination. A decree of origination is supra-intellectual, but it is not anti-intellectual.

Common Sense ('*aql 'urfi*)

Popular reason, or "common sense," is a part of rational cognition or knowledge that has become actualized in the mass mind or perception of society. Common sense can include knowledge acquired and taught to man by way of conceptual reason or sacred intellect, or it can be the collection of perceptions produced in the process of man's practical tendencies and mediated by his imaginations and conjectures. This collection becomes established in any given culture in its movement towards civilization.

Common sense aids in creating man's communal life and shared world. If what is commonly accepted coincides with the findings of conceptual reason, it shows the centrality of intellectuals in that community and is thus called a "common intellectuality". But if, on the other hand, common sense does not agree with conceptual reason and the latter remains silent on the issue, but sacred intellect does refer to it by way of a decree of guidance or origination, then this is tantamount to full-fledged approval. In such a case, society operates under the auspices of sacred intellect. Failing this, society falls to the level of mere common sense.

Universal Intellect (*'aql kulli*)

Universals are divided into two groups: extended universals (*kulli sa'i*) and conceptual universals (*kulli mafhumi*). Extended universals take into consideration the existential compass and inclusivity of one single reality; like the human soul, which exists as “soul” and is present in all of its different levels but is not bound to, or limited by, any specific one of them. The universal intellect, in this sense, is an expansive concrete reality⁵ and is not conditioned or limited by nature and its contingencies — just like a Platonic Idea. A conceptual universal is that very same expansive mental concept which is predicated of many individuals and applies to all of them equally. The universal intellect, in this particular meaning, is that human faculty which apprehends the universal and general meanings of things, and by this comes to understand the properties of all individual things.⁶

Individual Intellect (*'aql juzzi*)

The individual intellect is contrasted to, and is the opposite of, the conceptual universal intellect. The cognitive agencies of this intellect apply themselves to individual objects and sense data. The individual intellect is also called “conjecture” (*eikasia*). Instrumental reason mainly makes use of the individual intellect in its processes.

Empirical Reason (*'aql tajrubi*)

Empirical reason is the part of speculative reason which applies itself to natural phenomena, and in the process, it uses sense data and empirical analogies. The latter are based on universal and non-empirical propositions taken from the higher levels of the rational faculty, such as metaphysical reason.

Instrumental rationality, more than anything else, has its roots in empirical reason. Due to the predominance of empiricism and sensationalism in instrumental rationality, it denied the non-sensual bases of experimental and experiential knowledge and put (quantitative) inductive methods in the place of analogical ones. Next, by not accepting a valid role for non-sensual propositions in empirical knowledge, it denied their ability to represent concrete reality. Hence, when presenting non-sensual propositions (those whose subject is not strictly material), instrumental rationality — instead of relying on metaphysical reason or sacred intellect — takes recourse in common sense.

The Domination of Instrumental Rationality

Up to this point, eleven terms and concepts directly involving reason and intellect have been briefly discussed. Deliberation upon the very existence of these concepts, or their ability to represent concrete reality and hence their cognitive content, would call for a purely philosophical and epistemological debate and study. This present paper, though, does not approach them from this angle and suspends judgment on these issues. Instead, it now turns to a description of the domination of instrumental rationality and an elucidation of its shortcomings.

The modern world took shape only after turning its back on intuition and the sacred intellect, and the Enlightenment took off in a real way from within the parameters of conceptual reason. Pre-modern philosophers, in a considerable part of their discussions, gave attention to intellectual intuitions and the sacred intellect. The debate about universals and their *modus operandi* was one of the more serious ones between Plato and Aristotle. Plato held that the perception of universal concepts is by way of intuiting and “witnessing” the Ideas (or Forms) — which are the intellects. Aristotle, though he gave more attention to the act of prescinding in the mind, was of the opinion that the causal agent for the existence of the Forms is a heavenly Intellect, which is called the tenth Intellect or the active Intellect. The Muslim philosopher Farabi wrote a book, *al-Jamu’ bayn al-Ra’yayn*, in which he deliberated on these two opinions. This debate continued among Muslim philosophers and was taken up by the Peripatetics (*masha’*), the Illuminists (*ishraq*), and the Transcendentalists (*muta’aliyah*) in a very serious fashion. But it was more or less sidelined by the rationalist philosophies that emerged in the modern world.

The enlightenment that preceded the modern world was firmly rooted in the sacred intellect. The enlightenment of the modern age, though, began with conceptual reason. Muslim philosophers like Avicenna and Suhrawardi, by logical demonstrations, proved that the cognition and knowledge of the reality of the human soul is not possible but by recourse to intuitive intellect. Descartes, on the other hand, attempted to find his soul on the level of conceptual and discursive knowledge. Cartesian “intuition” then does not go beyond conceptual truisms.

Intuition, in its meaning of a direct and unmediated apprehension of reality, is limited in the modern world to sub-intellectual levels. Kant’s awareness of this fact led him to explicitly deny the existence of intellectual

intuition. He came to hold that intellectual concepts have no connection to the external concrete world. He took concepts not reducible to the level of sense data to be impediments to external reality, rather than taking them as guiding lights towards it. In this way, transforming Cartesian skepticism into a formal skepticism, Kant introduced the latter into the very fabric of human cognition and basis of knowledge. For him, conceptual reason could not throw any light on the externally existing world — all philosophical deliberations being limited to the rigid structures of mental concepts. This is how ontology was replaced by epistemology.

Alongside the weakening of intellectualism, sensationalism — which took into consideration only the practical dimension of life — grew stronger. In the nineteenth century, sensationalists and materialists took up the banner of an enlightenment with respect to the external world. At the start, they attempted to shed light upon the concrete world by methods of induction.

The nineteenth century also saw the creation of many an ideology. Just as before this time all things were measured and judged by means of the sacred intellect and metaphysical reason, Auguste Comte and Karl Marx sat in judgment with regard to the same issues. So, where previously the Prophets would speak about the Origin and End of all things, and metaphysicians would prove the existence of immaterial worlds, Comte, Marx, and their like now spoke of a dialectical materialism and the materiality of all parts of the world, denying thereby the metaphysical dimension of existence. The Fall of man from the transcendental levels of being to the natural world now appeared in the form of a story of his descent from the trees to the ground.

Comte held that religious thought and metaphysics corresponded to the periods of man's childhood and adolescence. He then — in a similar fashion to the Apostles of Jesus — wrote letters to the emperors of his time, asking them to declare their belief in the greatest of all pantheons, experimental science, and its high priest, himself. He expected empirical and individual reason — now inductive in form — to perform the functions of metaphysical and sacred intellect. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, Durkheim was still attempting to replace religious morality with a scientific one.

From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, the limitations and shortcomings of instrumental reason slowly became apparent. Intellectualist philosophers, and even some materialist philosophers, had known of these

limitations from ancient times. Hobbes and Hume, and before them the [scholastics], were aware of the truth that sensory knowledge and instrumental reason could not pass judgment on issues of moral values. Hume had spoken of the separation of knowledge from morality in the eighteenth century, but it wasn't until the end of the nineteenth century that this issue became one of public knowledge.

Another point that caught the attention of the intellectual community was the impotence of instrumental reason vis-à-vis metaphysical propositions. Logical positivists of the Vienna Circle — unlike the positivists of the nineteenth century, who took metaphysical propositions into consideration and then refuted them — declared from the outset the meaninglessness of such propositions. Individualistic rationality of the nineteenth century, despite its materialistic bent, would still appraise questions of total being and issues of eschatology, as well as speak on matters of social etiquette and morality. At the beginning of the twentieth century, though, such was not the case. It was with this in mind that Vilfredo Pareto, the Italian sociologist and economist, called the knowledge of the nineteenth century a “stupid knowledge”. Viennese positivists, in spite of their awareness of the limitations of sensory knowledge, attempted to separate the realm of science from the other fields of learning, so as to protect its position as the principal means of knowing external reality.

In debate and discussion since the third decade of the twentieth century under the heading of “philosophy of science”, one point stands out: the realm of science is not anything separate and different from the other realms of human knowledge. This point was the same old truth that intellectualist philosophers of ancient times were well aware of. They knew that empirical knowledge and sensory data perpetually needed propositions acquired by way of metaphysical and philosophical intellection — such things as the principle of contradiction, impossibility, and causality. They were also aware that the practicability and usefulness of instrumental reason was only feasible in a framework of laws and principles which themselves did not arise from this reason but rather were derived from the practical or sacred intellect.

In consideration of the limitations of instrumental reason and under the prevailing conditions, the metaphysical and sacred intellect — and even practical reason — lost their social role and cultural presence, making it necessary for instrumental reason to look elsewhere for cognitive content and a substantive base of knowledge. It found this “base” in common sense,

as previously defined. This is how instrumental knowledge formally came under the sway of what is variously called common sense, paradigm,⁷ or life-world. Hence, whenever the authority and validity of the higher and transcendental levels of intellect are doubted or flatly denied, custom and common sense takes over, with the prime factors and sources of cognition being reduced to social and political elements. These same factors and elements, which form the fabric of instrumental reason and knowledge, decide the nature and course of the fundamental propositions. Propositions that take shape in line with customary understanding and common sense are affected by factors with the power and ability to affect the public mind. Hence, the cognitive content and ground of knowledge of instrumental reason is finally and fundamentally tied to the workings of social power. That is, instrumental rationality and knowledge is not only the means and tools for power; it is also one of its products.

While instrumental rationality kept a safe distance from common sense and customary reason, it kept the last flames of enlightenment going for the modern world. Despite labelling metaphysical or value propositions as non-scientific, it still claimed to a true knowledge of reality by means of experimental propositions. But once the distance between instrumental reason (including all that goes by the name of science and empirical knowledge) and common sense was abolished — thereby revealing the fundamental role of non-empirical propositions in empirical knowledge — the instrumental role of empirical knowledge became evermore apparent. The consequence was that its ability to represent external reality came to be doubted and finally rejected.

Now even if instrumental reason, in its capacity as a knowledge (albeit scientific), had kept some semblance of external representability, it still could not have answered the fundamental questions of human existence, questions as to the beginning and end of man and the world, life and death, existence and non-existence, purpose and direction, dos and don'ts, excellences and faults. It is not that man confronts such questions only in times of leisure. Rather, they spring from his very existence and are always with him, his life always corresponding to the type and quality of answers that he finds for them. Man has no choice, he must answer them. The person who has not contemplated and thought about the answers to these questions, dreads to meet them.

The subject of these questions is beyond the limits and purview of instrumental reason. Some of them concern metaphysical intellect, while others have to do with practical reason. In considering the limits of instrumental rationality and its impotence in answering these type of questions, Max Weber held that the modern world — due to an absence of metaphysics — was without any firm standard or scale in relation to these issues. Consequently, this type of world gives licence to all and sundry to follow their carnal desires, and nothing more. Moderns, after some deliberation on the internal structure of instrumental reason, have not only come to see the external limitations of modern science — which are only the natural results of such a rational system — but have come to doubt the internal independence and integrity of this type of rationality in relation to the natural and empirical realm. Hence the representational validity of instrumental reason, even within its own “home” realm, has come under scrutiny and has finally been denied. In this way, any hopes of a modern enlightenment to the truth have been lost and the way towards postmodernism has been opened up.

When instrumental reason gives up the higher levels of intellect and basis of knowledge, it becomes totally engrossed with customs and common sense, the lowest forms of human knowledge and awareness. That is to say, public opinion creates both the basis and decides the directionality for this level of rationality. Now common sense and public opinion are not realities based on methods of logic or intuition; rather they are issues of social power that are in the hands of those controlling the reins of mass media and communications.

Return to Sacred Intellect

The way out of this quagmire is not to deny and oppose instrumental reason. Knowing the present state of affairs and becoming aware of the shortcomings and defects of instrumental rationality is necessary, but not sufficient. Postmodernists have usually satisfied themselves by describing the status quo, calling that which has come to be, an inescapable reality. Their wholehearted acceptance of the authority, power, and dominance of science has all but closed any window of opportunity for the pursuit and disclosure of reality.

The pursuit of truth and reality on the conceptual and practical levels is tantamount to the acceptance and official recognition of conceptual and

practical reason. If there is a way out of the crisis of the modern world, without doubt it lies in the direction of researches and inquiries concerning reality on the above-mentioned levels. By reviving such discussions and debates, a culture and civilization will follow that does not satisfy itself with just a refutation of instrumental reason and common sense, but strives to make full use of the other levels and types of rationality and intellectuality. Instrumental and customary rationality, when working under the auspices of higher levels of intellect, become real and acquire intellectual and cognitive content. But when they cut their connection with those higher levels, they become nothing but an unfettered power, blind to itself. Now, the inner content of any such blind power is nothing but a cynical nihilism.

The Prophets of God (may His Peace and Blessings be upon them all) strove from the outset to enrich the intellectual life of men — by calling them to what already lies in, and has been placed in, their innate nature and essence. The Prince of Believers, ‘Ali (upon whom be Peace), has said in this context: “God raised amongst the people His Messengers and sent Prophet after Prophet to them so as to have the Covenant of His nature fulfilled . . . and so as to bring out their hidden intellects.”⁸

There are few words that are seen as abundantly as “intellect” and “knowledge” in the Qur’an. In the Qur’anic terminology, these two words signify faithful representations of concrete reality and denote all the levels of intellect and knowledge — not limited to just empirical or instrumental reason and knowledge. The highest level of intellect is the sacred intellect. Enlightened directly by Divine Grace and inspired by the Holy Spirit, it reveals the Divine Word to man. The next level, that of conceptual and discursive reason (in both its aspects of speculative and practical rationality), applies itself to deliberation on the origin and end of man, defining thereby his duties and responsibilities in this world. The sacred intellect and conceptual reason are divine proofs and His “messengers,” their role being complementary. Man’s conceptual reason allows him access to higher truths and knowledge. The sacred intellect, in the beginning, actuates and engenders man’s discursive reason, and in the end, opens up the higher realms of being.

Modernity starts with the denial of the authority of revelation and the sacred intellect. This denial has its apparent roots in the historical disfavor shown to reason on the part of the Church. The Church’s disregard of conceptual reason led to the inception of a perceived dichotomy and opposition

between the two levels of rational cognition.⁹ While the Church remained a world power, this opposition worked to the benefit of what was called faith. This same opposition works now, in the modern world, to the favor of reason. In its turn, conceptual reason, by turning its back on intuitive and sacred intellect, has severed its existential roots and has in effect dried up and become lifeless. Instrumental rationality and customary reason, when emptied of the authority and dominion of Intellect and Revelation and made secular, are as two abandoned corpses on the hands of modernity. It is only the light of the Intellect which can revive them, and give life to those who are dead.

Notes

¹ In what follows, the word “intellect” will be used to designate the intuitive faculty (*nous*) in rational cognition, whereas the word “reason” will usually refer to the discursive or inferential faculty (*logos*). In this sense, “reason”, when used by itself and without a qualifying adjective before it, will stand for “ratiocinative reason” (*dianoia*). Such distinctions were deemed essential due to the bewildering chaos of notions surrounding the words “intellect” and “reason” in our times, and also due to the main theme of this paper. *Trans*.

² This is a very freehand paraphrase of a poem by the Iranian poet, Hafiz.

³ To quote St. Thomas, “Reasoning is a defect of intellect.”

⁴ Muslim philosophers take this to be the activity of the Divine intelligence. St. Thomas, on the other hand, only sees it to be *choristos* (separate) and *amiges* (pure, unmixed), implying that it is distinct from matter and incorporeal.

⁵ In this meaning, the universal intellect extends through the different states and levels of a single individual of a species. *Trans*.

⁶ In this more common meaning, the universal intellect extends through the different individuals, potential or real, of that species or the concept and idea of that species. These distinctions are not the same as those referred to by “direct” and “reflex” universals. *Trans*.

⁷ The term “paradigm” in this context was coined by Thomas Kuhn. In 1962 Kuhn published *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which claimed that the sciences do not progress by scientific method. Rather, scientists work within a *paradigm* (set of accepted beliefs), which eventually weakens until new theories and scientific methods replace it.

⁸ *Nahj al-Balaghah*, Sermon 1

⁹ This remained the historical reality, despite the valiant efforts of such figures as St. Augustine and St. Thomas, who attempted to resolve this opposition in a very real way. See *Summa Theologica*, I:58:3, II-II:49:5.