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TELOS OF KNOWLEDGE

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Knowledge (*ilm*) is the most valuable essence and quality of being human; it is of two types. The first, which is our main concern here, is the inherent repository, granted by God, to every child; it is ingrained in the very essence of his or her being. No child is born like an empty slate—there is no *tabula rasa*; rather, every human being is born with an innate knowledge of Truth and, consequently, of falsehood at the level of principles. This is an extremely valuable asset.

The second kind of knowledge is that which is acquired later in life by means of intellect; it is a derivative of the innate knowledge of Names (*asmāʾ*). There is a difference of opinion about Names and the Named, but regardless, knowledge of the Name of a thing is the knowledge of the thing itself. And knowledge of the thing itself is the knowledge of the existents, that is, everything that has a name—and this includes the non-existence (*ʿadam*) itself because it has a name.

The human consciousness (*shuʿūr*) has an inherent knowledge of all creation and this knowledge is not a passive reflection on a mirror; rather, it also has a critical awareness because Allah Most High has infused the innate knowledge of His Unique Oneness (*tawḥīd*) along with the knowledge of the existents within the human beings. Thus, if knowledge of a thing does not bear witness to His Oneness, then that knowledge is not worthy of a human being; it is not even knowledge; it is ignorance (*jahl*). This is the foundational principle of our epistemology.

If knowledge obtained through inquiry into nature of existents does not convert into knowledge of the Creator of existents, then that is not knowledge, because, by definition, knowledge conceived by the human mind is the knowledge of existence (*wujūd*) itself and it may be true or false, but having acquired this knowledge I am now able to express this knowledge and this knowledge cannot be categorized into true or false without the God-given

ability of distinguishing Truth from falsehood. There is a great mercy of Allah Most High hidden in it and had we recognized and accepted this mercy with gratitude and paid attention to the responsibility entailed in it, the Muslim mind would not have been so impoverished today.

Allah Most High has made existence (*wujūd*) a symbol and a sign. That is, knowledge of every existent—whether conceived in the mind or existing outside the mind—is beneficial because this knowledge is the knowledge of one of the Signs of Allah Most High (*āyāt Allāh*), thus, if I have obtained knowledge of the thing as a sign and symbol of Allah Most High with true certainty (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*), then I have become capable of understanding that this thing is a symbol, a window unto the “world of presence”—even if the knowledge of the thing may not be true, it remains a window unto that world. In other words, if the thing I have conceived as a chair is in fact a table, that does not take away from the benefit it provided me as a window unto that world of presence as long as the thing conceived so is conceived as a symbol. Thus, knowledge, whether true or false, is beneficial and since no knowledge can be free of two defects—incompletion and possibility of error—both being a *sine qua non* of the human condition, it does not impact its usefulness.

We must understand this clearly: Two things are not possible for human knowledge; one is that it cannot be complete and there will always be a possibility of error in it. Whenever I insert myself into any scheme of knowledge or scheme of things, it is bound to have flaws and it is bound to be incomplete. Furthermore, the consensus of all philosophers, believers and disbelievers alike, is that knowledge of the reality of a thing is impossible to obtain through observation and experimentation; it can only be obtained through a transmitted report (*khabar*) and it cannot be obtained through observation and experiment (*nazar*).

We must understand this clearly: we cannot bring reality of a thing into our consciousness beyond the limit of imagination, that is, the knowledge of reality is difficult. If I understand form of a thing (*shayʿ*) and the nature of elements involved in it and even if I understood it correctly, I only understood its form, not its reality. Human consciousness, his free will, can take him to belief or disbelief, both ride on the same vehicle and we need to understand this in the context of contemporary vocabulary of knowledge otherwise, we cannot deal with the world because when we speak a language that is not understood by the contemporary discourse then, we put ourselves in a blind alley because when we say, all of this is in the innate human disposition, *fiṭra*, and, in response, they ask, “what is *fiṭra*”, then we have no answer, because they say, *fiṭra* is mere compulsion (*jabar*), that is, what cannot be escaped, what cannot be altered. The eye, for instance, is compelled by its very nature to

see; one cannot allocate listening to it and this is its sheer biological function, shared by all living beings. You can see the Ka'ba with the eyes or you can set your eyes on a casino, but you cannot ask your eye to act like an ear; this is built-in compulsion.

When they reduce the discourse to this level, then we have no answer, no way to convey what we believe. At least not in a language that they can understand, because to express ourselves convincingly, we must realize that there are three steps in this process: the opponent must listen to you and having heard you, he should not feel as if he is hearing something alien, secondly, when he presents his counter view to your point of view, and says, my vision of reality, my concept of reality, is more logical, more productive, more fruitful than what you have said, then we should be able to present a cogent response to him. But we have reached such a low level in our religious discourse that we cannot present a counter argument and when we become helpless, we merely side step by saying, 'actually you do not understand what I mean.'

This poverty of our discourse is painful. Afterall why is it that out of all branches of knowledge, it is only the discourse on religious knowledge which is so impoverished. You see those young men coming out of IT training schools, they have these dark circles around their eyes, because they have been up all night. Our elders used to have those circles because they were striving in the path of knowledge, but now, the religion of our Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, has been orphaned!

But let us return to the question. I was saying, human knowledge, by definition, is incomplete and contains the possibility of error. These are two given; there is no escape from them. When a scientist embarks on a journey of discovery, he does so with the belief that he will make discoveries, but with the simultaneous belief that his knowledge will never be complete. Similarly, a philologist starting research on a word does so with the understanding that complete knowledge is unattainable. Anyone in any profession, pondering the meaning of "knowledge," will be forced to accept from the outset that while they will strive to understand and gain more knowledge than they currently possess, their understanding will never be complete. This type of knowledge is one where completeness and absolute accuracy are unattainable. This knowledge emerges from the human will, creativity and freedom, and its limits are unrestricted by any constraints.

Along with these two kinds of human knowledge there is a third aspect of seeking knowledge: whatever branch of knowledge we pursue, we must do so with the condition that knowledge so obtained should not weaken the foundations of our belief. Thus, our scientific knowledge, our knowledge of the world, needs to be a means to the knowledge of our inner being, a means

to understanding our consciousness and knowledge must lead to certitude otherwise it is not knowledge. Certitude, *yaqīn*, is the ultimate goal, for this world is a world of uncertainty and the knowledge that a believer obtains, provides the basis for certitude and one rides the vehicle of certitude to become a witness; this act of witnessing (*shuhūd*) is the greatest level of gnosis of the real; this is experiential knowledge.

Since our religion has a complete epistemology of knowledge, whatever theories we construct in various sciences should not weaken the foundational structure of our beliefs; our responsibility is to understand the world correctly through the lens of the beliefs and through the epistemic foundation of our religion. We have neglected this aspect of seeking knowledge. We have not created the framework to understand the modern world and its sciences. This has serious implications for the Umma. Knowledge is a vehicle to reach our goal, which is the Creator Himself. If you reflect on every action, big or small, and check if it is bringing you closer to Allah or is distancing you from Him, and make decisions based on this reflection, you will be continuously in a state of presence. This presence is the key to gaining knowledge of the inner sciences of being; if you have a state (*ḥāl*) of presence, you do not need specific meditations; you experience the presence of Allah Most High in every action. May Allah grant us all the ability to do so.

The claim of faith is that it establishes a life based on the values of truth, goodness, and beauty for the individual and for the entire societal order. Built into this order is the understanding that our knowledge will never be complete. However, when people started believing that complete knowledge is attainable, they began to reject the divine knowledge Allah Most High has provided.

There are two types of standards for the acceptance or rejection of knowledge. One is empirical verification, where you can show and prove something directly, like verifying Himalayas exist; you just have to step outside and look. This kind of verification is necessary for worldly sciences. The other kind of justification is through outcomes; where the outcomes of knowledge justify its truthfulness. This is crucial because humans need faith in Truth, not just knowledge of it. An inherent understanding tells us that absolute and eternal principles are to be believed through experiential knowledge, not just learned. Allah Most High has given us the ability to adhere to this approach. True knowledge, as derived from the Qur'ān and Hadith, is certain knowledge. When we apply our intellect to it, there is a shift from experiential to conjectural (*ẓanni*) knowledge and I am not using *ẓann* in a negative sense. The more it shifts from certainty to *ẓann*, the more opaque it becomes.

This dual scheme illustrates that while there is a primary order of

certain knowledge, there are other levels of knowledge and the complete understanding of Reality is not possible by humans. Allah's words fully express the Truths meant to be known. The expression of knowledge in Allah's words encompasses its complete essence. Our incomplete knowledge becomes meaningful within the framework of Divine revelation, clarifying that the desire for complete knowledge is delusional.

Rejection of the jewels of Divine knowledge granted by Allah Most High arises from the inability to recognize them and by turning away from the Divine revelation. Realized knowledge has a force of its own. During the 1960s, many intelligent Westerners accepted Islam. They did so by coming into contact with ordinary Muslims who possessed that realized knowledge and it reflected on their faces, in their actions, in their being. That was the most effective, because the truth does not need to be expressed in words; it has a force through its experiential reality.

Our tragedy today is the lack of this aspect of knowledge. We do not pay attention to Allah Most High and do not fulfill His rights, but are eager to fulfill the rights of our jobs and bosses! So, the religious knowledge is now the most backward tradition, meaning that the religious mind has become the most backward mind. If we are unable to create a system of thought and reigning paradigms, at least we can create something in our own being, our own self, a kingdom we have in our own hand, our own absolute kingdom, that is, your inner self, your emotions, where is Allah in them? Those who believe in the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, and are concerned about fulfilling the rights of their relationship with him should never be like that.

One way to understand whether or not you are giving these rights to your religion is to see how your solitude is. No man is ever completely alone, because he is always with himself; there are the recording angels and Allah is with us wherever we are. If a person's solitude is good, then his companionship with others will also be good because that companionship is the child of solitude and a good companionship cannot be born from bad solitude. Faith provides the foundation of good solitude and hence of a good society.

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This is an abridged translation of a lecture by Ahmad Javaid at "Off the School", delivered on February 21, 2022. The original can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFsX3E6SH1Q>, accessed July 1, 2024.