

Laws and Practices: Classification of Sciences

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Article

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Read and your Lord is Most Honorable (Qur'an, 96:3)

Who taught (to write) with the pen (Qur'an, 96:4)

Taught man what he knew not (Qur'an, 96:5)

The Prophet of God (s) said: "Knowledge is of two kinds: Knowledge of religions and knowledge of bodies." [Al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 1, p.220]

Islamic traditions have classified knowledge based on different and diverse criteria. For example, knowledge which is beneficial for mankind, knowledge limited to words, knowledge which is deeply rooted in heart, knowledge which is seen in one's behaviour and actions, knowledge of forbidden and permitted, knowledge of one's duties, knowledge of knowing God, knowledge of blessings of God, knowledge of what God wants from creatures, knowledge of what expels a person from the fold of religion, knowledge of medicine, knowledge of grammar and linguistics, knowledge of celestial bodies etc. However, knowledge is also classified by the intention or purpose of acquisition and it is the most important.

Basic Classification of knowledge

- The Prophet of God (s) once entered mosque where there were a group of people surrounding a man. **"Who is that?"** inquired the Prophet (s). He was told, **"He is an Allamah**, (i.e., a very learned man)."**"What is an Allamah?"** asked the Prophet (s). They told him: **"He is the most learned of men regarding Arab genealogies, past episodes, the days of the Jahiliyyah (ignorance) and Arabic poetry."** The Prophet (s) said: **"That is a knowledge whose ignorance does not harm one nor is its possession of any benefit to one."** Then the Prophet (s) said: **"Verily, knowledge consists of these three: the 'firm sign' (ayatun muhkamah), the 'just duty' (faridatun 'adilah) and the 'established sunnah' (sunnatun qa'imah). All else is superfluous."** [Bihar al-Anwar,

- The prefect *arif* Ayatullah Shahabadi (r) says: The expression ‘firm sign’ implies the rational sciences and the true doctrines and divine teachings. ‘Just duty’ implies the science of ethics and self–purification. ‘Established sunnah’ refers to the science of the exoteric aspect and the bodily conduct (i.e., involving some kind of physical activity).

Beneficial types of knowledge

Imam Khomeini (r) gives a brief explanation of above tradition and mentions that all the beneficial sciences (*‘ulum*) are divisible into following three:

1: The *‘ilm* (science) that relates to excellences (*kamalat*) of intellect and spiritual duties that play a strengthening and educative role in sphere of spirit and immaterial intellect. These include knowledge of God and His attributes, angels of all kinds and armies of God, knowledge of prophets and *awliya’* and their stations and degrees, knowledge of revealed scriptures, character of revelation (*wahy*), world of hereafter and return of the creatures to the world of *ghayb*, world of *barzakh* and resurrection etc. Bearers of this knowledge, after the prophets and *awliya’* (a) are the *hukama’*, the *‘urafa’* and the mystics.

2: The science that relates to acts, discipline and education of heart and its esoteric actions and duties. It consists of knowledge of moral virtues, such as forbearance, gratefulness, modesty, humility, sincerity, courage, generosity, piety, etc. and ways and means of acquiring them as well as the knowledge of moral vices, such as jealousy, self–admiration, pride, malice, hypocrisy, deceptiveness, love of position, world and self, etc., and the knowledge of their causes and ways of freedom from them. Bearers of this knowledge after the prophets and *awliya’* (a) are experts of ethics and mystic teachings.

3: The science that relates to bodily acts and the duties of the self’s outward life. It deals with the education of the exoteric being and its disciplining consists of the science of jurisprudence, etiquettes and manners, social interactions, management of home, and politics or civic administration. Bearers of this knowledge after the prophets and *awliya’* (a) are the learned in the exoteric (*ulama’-e zahir*), legists (*fuqaha*) and traditionists (*muhaddithun*).

Sciences of World or Sciences of Hereafter?

- All the sciences, whether experimental or purely theoretical, from a certain aspect, fall under one of the three categories mentioned by the Prophet of God (s).

- In addition, all the sciences, from the sacred knowledge of God and divine scriptures to the core experimental modern sciences such as nanotechnology can be worldly (for the worldly aims) of Hereafterly (for the blessings of Hereafter) depending upon the intention of the seeker of knowledge to acquire it.
- The sciences of medicine, engineering, astronomy, physics and the like that are experimental sciences, when looked upon as Divine signs and symbols, and the science of history and the like which are purely theoretical sciences, when looked upon as a means for drawing lesson, are included in *ayatun muhkamah*, because, by their means the knowledge of God or the knowledge of resurrection is attained or confirmed. Thus, a student studying these sciences and an intellectual expert in these sciences can be enlightened to pursue heavenly path in the life of this world by observing divine signs and taking lesson from them.
- At times, the learning of the sciences falls under *faridatun ‘adilah* and at times under *sunnatun qa’imah*. For example, if the acquisition of medical sciences is for saving human life, it is *faridatun ‘adilah*, a just duty. However, if it is only for making money and better material life of this world and leads to neglect of the Hereafter, it becomes blame worthy. Many other experimental sciences or researches have to follow a specific and established methodology (*sunnatun qa’imah*) based on firm observation.
- Some of the sciences are harmful for man and lead him to neglect his essential duties. This kind consists of the blameworthy sciences—such as magic, jugglery, sorcery and the like— and one must refrain from their pursuit.
- There are other sciences that are neither harmful nor beneficial, like those pursued in time of leisure for amusement, such as astrology, etc. It would be much better if one could relate pursuit of these sciences to threefold *‘ulum* (mentioned by the Prophet), otherwise it is better to refrain from them as far as is possible.

Few hadiths on various attributes of knowledge

- Prophet of God (s) said: **“Knowledge has no limits and bounds, so acquire the best from it.”** [*Bihar al-Anwar*, v. 1, p.219]
- Imam Ali (a) said: **“Take from every branch of knowledge, the best of it, for indeed the (honey) bee partakes from the most beautiful of every flower, so two precious substances are produced from it: in one of them is a cure for the people (i.e. honey), and the other is a means of illumination (i.e. wax).”** [*Ghurar Al-Hikam wa Durar Al-Kalim*, p. 735, hadith # 113]
- Imam Ali (a) said: **“The knowledge which is not authenticated by intellect, misleads.”** [*Mizan al-Hikmah*, hadith #14116]
- Prophet of God (s): **“The best knowledge is the one which is beneficial.”** [*Bihar al-Anwar*, v.77, p.114]

The praise of knowledge in hadiths

- Knowledge, irrespective of its kind (whether theoretical or experimental) is highly praised in Islamic traditions. Such knowledge is obviously the one that has three attributes mentioned by the Prophet of God (s) which include being rational and in accordance with the divine teachings, follows ethical rules and is combined with self-purification and follows a specific and logically proven method. It should also be beneficial for mankind, removes suffering and makes human life better. Act and process of seeking such knowledge that benefits whole mankind and remains as a beneficial legacy for every nation is also highly praised.
- A scholar or scientist irrespective of his religion or race, has to spend several years of working hard, pursuing new ideas, doing difficult experiments, calculations and interpretations and has to deal with several failures before making an important discovery

that can save lives of millions of people. Examples include discovery of a new drug or technique for the treatment or cure of a disease, and invention of a device or equipment that saves human life or makes it better.

- Similarly, a pious and highly knowledgeable scholar of divine religion and ethics, gradually awakens a society by imparting divine knowledge, reforms the ideology and character of young and old, awakens them to be good human beings and obedient servants of God and prepares them to be successful in their worldly life and hereafter, makes them aware of their rights and motivates them to rise against oppressors to get them has a very high status. Such scholars have lofty rank to be the successors of prophets (s) on the day of judgement.
- Based on above examples, Islamic traditions have highly extolled knowledge and obviously the one who acquires such knowledge is much better than the knowledge itself. Herein few such hadiths are mentioned:
- Imam Ali (a) said: **“Knowledge is life.”** [*Mizan al-Hikmah*, hadith #13673]
- Imam Ali (a) said: **“Knowledge gives life to human soul, enlightens intellect and brings demise of ignorance.”** [*Mizan al-Hikmah*, hadith #13678]
- Prophet of God (s) said: **“Knowledge is life of Islam and pillar of religion.”** [*Mizan al-Hikmah*, hadith #13676]
- Prophet of God (s) said: **“If the ink of pen of knowledgeable is weighed with the blood of martyrs, it will be heavier.”** [*Mizan al-Hikmah*, hadith #13703]
- Imam al-Baqir (a) said: **“One hour of scholarly discussion is superior to one night of worship.”** [*Bihar al Anwar*, vol. 1, p. 204]

- Prophet of God (s) said: “**Knowledgeable are the beacons of light on earth, they are my successors and are my inheritors and inheritors of other prophets.**” [*Mizan al-Hikmah*, hadith #13699]

Conclusion

The Prophet of God (s) said: “**For everything there is a way and the way to Paradise is (through acquisition of) knowledge.**” [*Kanz al-Ummal*, hadith # 28803]

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