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# Construction of a Basic Perspective on Critical Thinking in Islam

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## Abstract

**Objective** This research aims at the constructing a basic perspective on critical thinking in line with Islamic principles with a brief explanation of such principles.

**Methodology** This study uses exegetical methods, by studying the relevant parts of the religious texts and systemizing the information in a critical way.

**Research findings** The research demonstrates that the principles for constructing an Islamic critical thinking perspective are found in the primary sources of Islam. The knowledge (العلم; al-'ilm) makes the core of Islamic critical thinking, and means of such knowledge are the revelation (الوحي; al-wahy), the use of senses (الحواس; al-hawas), intellect (reason and heart, العقل و القلب; al-aql wa al-qalb), historical experience or testimony (السياحة او الشهادة; al-siyahah aw al-shidah), and meditating on the natural and physical world (الكون; al-kaun). There are other means such as prophetic dreams (الرؤيا الصادقة; al-ruya al-sadiqah), insight (الفراسة; al-firasah), illumination (المكاشفة; al-mukashafah), and inspiration (الالهام; al-ilham), though they are dismissed to account for any scholarly opinion or position and thus they remain non-binding according to *Shariah*. However, they can be a gift of a genius mind that is extraordinarily critical, helping such minds in understanding and creativity. Critical thinking includes using many human faculties and the Quran frequently emphasizes contemplation (التفكر; al-tafakur), reflection (التدبر; at-tadabbur), understanding (التفقه; at-tafaqquh), and reasoning (التعقل; at-taakul); and these concepts are the foundations of critical thinking which could be developed and elaborated in many ways.

**Applications** The need of having an Islamic construction of critical thinking is because of the special worldview of Islam and its conception of knowledge which treats revelation (الوحي; al-wahy) as the primary source of belief and knowledge. The findings of the study can be useful in fashioning a basic curriculum for critical thinking for Islamic educational institutions.

**Keywords:** Critical Thinking, Islam, Revelation, Knowledge

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## Introduction

Any endeavor of constructing critical thinking from an Islamic perspective has to be based necessarily on the sources of belief and knowledge in Islam, its worldview, and the means and ways that are suggested by the Quran and Prophetic Traditions, which by elaboration and development can guide a person to develop his critical aptitude. The scholarly attitude of Muslims demonstrates a great deal of critical thinking throughout history in the major subjects of inquiry in Islamic studies and the subjects which come under humanities, social sciences, and pure sciences. The works of commentaries of the Quran (*Tafsir*) and the Prophetic Traditions (*Hadith*) are embodiments of the particular Islamic critical style and Islamic Jurisprudence (*Fiqh*) takes the scope of critical thinking to a more prominent level for practical reasons. These three fields of study, *Tafsir*, *Hadith*, and *Fiqh*, are the main academic areas that are necessary for every school of thought in Islam (*madhab*). In addition to these fields of studies, developed two more disciplines in which critical thinking attained a novel sophistication, less based on transmitted knowledge (*munqool*) and more on rational grounds (*maqool*). These two areas are theology (*kalam*) and Islamic philosophy (*falsafah*).

In this article, I will firstly, maintain that knowledge ('ilm) is the foundation of critical thinking in Islam; secondly, the sources of

belief and knowledge in Islam that can make core foundations of the critical thinking are discussed; thirdly, a brief discussion on subjective knowledge is included while dismissing their importance in critical thinking; fourthly, a few reasons for being at a higher level of critical thinking are mentioned; fifthly, a distinction is made between demonstrative and subjective knowledge; and finally an explanation of main concepts relevant to critical thinking that are present in the Quran are briefly explained.

## Objectives of the Research

This research is mainly focused on drafting a basic perspective on the subject of critical thinking following Islamic principles that are relevant to knowledge and research. Furthermore, how such a perspective makes a unique stance which could make a valuable part of designing the curriculum of the subject of critical thinking at Islamic educational institutions.

## Methodology Used

The study uses the exegetical methods.

## Concepts Underlying the Research

The concepts that are mainly at use in this research include means of knowledge constructs such as (الوحي;*al-wahy*), the use of senses (الحواس;*al-hawas*), intellect (reason and heart, العقل والقلب;*al-aql wa al-qalb*), historical experience or testimony (السياحة والشهادة;*al-siyahah aw al-shidah*), and meditating on the natural and physical world (الكون;*al-kaun*). Furthermore, to use these constructs in critical

thinking a few inquisitive constructs are explored such as contemplation (التفكر; *al-tafakur*), reflection (التدبر; *at-tadabbur*), understanding (التفقه; *at-tafaqquh*), and reasoning (التعقل; *at-taakul*).

### Findings

The findings that can be deduced from this research include : (1) some exclusively Islamic means of knowledge should be included in critical thinking, (2) the revelation as a means of knowledge makes Islamic critical thinking strikingly different from the secular viewpoint, and (3) among Muslims discrimination between demonstrative knowledge and subjective knowledge is necessary.

### Knowledge (*'ilm*) as Foundation of Critical Thinking in Islam

The Quran gives a central place to knowledge in knowing, following, and living by. The Quran states, “And follow not (O man, i.e., say not, or do not, or witness not) that of which you have no knowledge. Verily, the hearing, and the sight, and the heart of each of those ones will be questioned (by Allāh)” (The Quran, 17:36). The implication of this Quranic stance on knowledge to critical thinking is clear that the basic foundation of critical thinking should be on knowledge. Induction, deduction, arguments, premises, inference, evaluation, verification, falsification, analysis, application, etc. should be then knowledge-based and the conclusions drawn from them should be value-laden with levels of certainties, in

accordance to the merits of the evidence, depending on the nature of a subject.

The other crucial aspect of critical thinking is that it is not whimsical and it cannot flourish in a vacuum; it can only occur within the flux of knowledge and information. And Islam encourages everyone to seek knowledge as the Prophet says “Seeking of knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim...” (Ibn Mājah, 1952, Vol.1, p.81), and those who do not have knowledge are instructed to ask those who know, the Quran states, “Then ask those who possess the Message (*ah-lul-dhikr*) if you do not know” (The Quran, 21:7 and 16:43). Furthermore, the best state of being knowledgeable is to be with the firm standing in knowledge (*raasikhoona fil 'ilm*) (The Quran, 3:7).

Though knowledge makes the solid foundation of critical thinking, yet it is necessary to know what means are there that could produce or lead to such knowledge. Therefore, it is important to include a brief discussion about the means of knowledge from an Islamic perspective.

### Sources of Belief and Knowledge in Islam

A brief description of means of knowledge that make bedrock of critical thinking in Islam is as follows.

#### 1. The Revelation (الوحي; *al-wahy*)

The revelation (the Quran and Sunnah) touches many domains of knowledge and provides their foundations. Some of these foundations are very important because they

make the fundamental principle of many disciplines. For example, regarding human origin, the revelation gives the understanding of the origin of the human being, his mission on the Earth and purpose, and the meaning of his being. Against materialism, the Quran speaks about the unseen world and beings. These are a few important concepts among many others that illustrate clearly that the foundations of knowledge in Islam are distinct because of its special conception of reality. It is seemingly because of these reasons among others, the Quran while being revealed calls for reflection over it, as it states: “Those who, when they are admonished with the Signs of their Lord, droop not down at them as if they were deaf or blind” (The Quran, 25: 73).

Islam gives freedom to human beings to venture further into knowledge and spend efforts for creativity and innovation for beneficence. This knowledge for beneficence is called “*al-ilim al-nafiah*”. The beneficial knowledge (العلم النافعة; *al-ilim al-nafiah*) is highly valued in Islam. Muslims are encouraged to supplicate by praying: “O Allaah, indeed I ask You for beneficial knowledge (العلم النافعة; *al-ilim al-nafiah*) ...” (Ibn Majah, 1952, Vol.1, p.298).

The revelation is the first source of knowledge and it is comprehensive as the Quran states, “...We have sent down to thee the Book explaining all things...” (The Quran, 16:89), and it is truthful as The Quran states about itself that, “... it is the truth (*al-haq*) from their

Lord...” (The Quran, 47: 2). After knowing the truth (*al-haq*), human beings also need guidance (*hidayah*), and the revelation is guidance as to the Quran states, “... This is the Book, in it is guidance sure, without doubt, to those who fear Allāh” (The Quran, 2: 1-2). Revelation includes both the Quran and authentic Hadith or Sunnah. Muslims are guided in the Quran to follow these two authorities. The Messenger says, “Verily, I have been given the Quran and something along with it ...” (Abu Da’ud, n.a., vol.4,p.4604) and therefore Sunnah is also God-given.

## 2. The Senses ( الحواس; *al-hawas*)

The Quran gives due consideration to senses as a means of knowledge. The Quran states, “It is He Who brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when ye knew nothing; and He gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and affection: that ye may give thanks (to Allāh)” (The Quran, 16: 78). The Quran encourages people to use their senses for understanding, for example, the Quran states, “Do they not look at the camels, how they are made? And at the sky, how it is raised high? And the mountains, how they are fixed firm? And at the Earth, how is spread out? ” (The Quran, 88: 17- 20).

## 3. The Intellect (reason and heart, العقل او القلب; *al-aql aw al- qalb*)

The Quran places the intellect at very high importance in understanding and as a means of knowledge. The intellect is seemingly a combination of mind and heart. The Quran

uses sometimes reason (*alaqal*) and sometimes heart (*qalab*) for understanding. It seems there is a resonance between the heart and mind and the co-functioning of them could be named intellect. The Quran encourages people to reason as it states, “And He it is who grants life and deals death; and to Him is due the alternation of night and day. Will you not, then, use your reason?” (The Quran, 23:80). And “And [remember:] whatever you are given [now] is but for the [passing] enjoyment of life in this world, and its embellishment - whereas that which is with God is [so much] better and more enduring. Will you not, then, use your reason? ” (The Quran, 28:60). On the other hand, the Quran encourages people to use their hearts to understand as it states, “Will they not, then, ponder over this Qur’an? - or are there locks upon their hearts?” (The Quran, 47:24). On the other hand, believers are encouraged to pray for the steadfastness of their hearts as the Quran states, “O our Sustainer! Let not our hearts swerve from the truth after Thou hast guided us; and bestow upon us the gift of Thy grace: verily, Thou art the [true] Giver of Gifts” (The Quran, 3:8).

#### 4. Historical Experience or Testimony (السِّيَاحَةُ وَالشَّهَادَةُ; *al-siyahah aw al-shidah*)

The Quran encourages people to learn from history as the visible sign of the past. Histories of the past civilizations are the signs left by them which could be seen even today as archeological structures and remains. Though

many stories of the past nations and the events of history are even mentioned in the Quran, however, the Quran encourages looking at the physical signs of the past civilizations for understanding and lessons. The Quran states, Say: “Go ye through the earth and see what has been the end of those guilty (of sin)” (The Quran, 27: 69). Moreover, “Many were the Ways of Life that have passed away before you: travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those who rejected Truth” (The Quran, 3:137).

#### 5. Natural and Physical World (الْكُون; *al-kaun*)

The Quran encourages people to look at the natural and physical signs to understand. Most of the understanding from these signs is about the higher knowledge of metaphysics and monotheism. Various verses of the Quran show how the physical world is itself a means and source of knowledge and manifestation of the higher knowledge. The Quran states, “Behold! in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of Night and Day, there are indeed Signs for men of understanding” (The Quran, 3: 190). In the same manner, “On the earth are signs for those of assured Faith. As also in your own selves, will yet not then see? And in heaven is your sustenance, as (also) that which ye are promised” (The Quran, 51: 20 -22). The way the universe is made as an intelligent design is also subject of the Quran to ponder upon as the Quran states, “He created the heavens

without any pillars that ye can see; He set on the earth mountains standing firm, lest it should shake with you; and He scattered through it beasts of all kinds. We send down rain from the sky, and produce on the earth every kind of noble creature, in pairs.” (The Quran, 31: 10). Therefore, the Quran encourages discovering nature and exploring it as it is written in the Quran: “Say: “Travel through the earth and see how Allah did originate creation; so will Allah produce a later creation: for Allah has power over all things” (The Quran, 29: 20).

### Subjective Knowledge

There are other means of knowledge in Islam that could come under the category of subjective knowledge. They are prophetic dreams (الرؤيا الصادقة; *al-ruya al-sadiqah*), insight (الفراسة; *al-firasah*), illumination (المكاشفة; *al-mukashafah*), and inspiration (الالهام; *al-ilham*). Though these means of knowledge are not foundations of critical thinking, yet their importance and presence in Muslim life, society, and Islamic studies cannot be dismissed. The obscurity and esoteric nature of these means make them non-binding, though they remain meaningful for those who possess them or accept them with the condition of not being against the creed, tenets, and explicit teachings and understanding of Islam, *Shariah*.

Firstly, Prophetic or true dreams (الرؤيا الصادقة; *al-ruya al-sadiqah*) can be glad tidings (المبشرات; *mubasharat*) from Allāh and

therefore a source of knowledge about the unseen and future events. The Messenger said, “A good dream (that comes true) of a righteous man is one of forty-six parts of prophetism” (Al-Bukhārī, 2001, Vol. 9 p.30). Furthermore, the Messenger says “When the time draws near (when the Resurrection is near) a believer's dream can hardly be false. And the truest vision will be of one who is himself the most truthful in speech, for the vision of a Muslim is the forty-fifth part of Prophecy...” (Al-Bukhārī, 2001, Vol. 4 p.1773). Secondly, intuition or insight (الفراسة; *al-firasah*) is also a source of knowledge. The believers are also given a special insight into matters as the Messenger says, “Fear the Insight of the Believer, for verily he sees with the Light of God” (Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, n.a, vol.5, p. 298). Thirdly, illumination (المكاشفة; *al-mukashafah*) or vision is another special way of knowing, although Muslim scholars are not unanimous on its acceptance. This type of means received the support of Al-Ghazali in his *ihyā’ ‘ulūm ad-dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences) and it has a major scope in Islamic mysticism, Sufism. One of the earliest pieces of evidence to support it comes from a report in which Umar ibn ul Khattab, the second caliph of Islam, was once giving a sermon and suddenly called out O Sariyah, who was heading an army on a battlefield, the mountain, and he proclaimed this thrice. When the messenger of that army came and asked Umar saying that they confronted the

enemy and were getting defeated, but suddenly heard i.e. O Sariyah, the mountain, and this was heard thrice and then they turned their backs towards the mountain and due to this Allāh defeated the enemy (Al-Muttaqi al-Hindi, 1981, V.12, P.571). The conclusions made out of this report are not the same; some scholars believe that it is one of the instances of supernatural wonders (الكرامة; *al-karamat*) that are bestowed upon the pious people. And Muslim scholars are unanimous on accepting the reality of *karamat*. Fourthly, inspiration (الإلهام; *al-ilham*) is another source of knowledge. Inspiration is connected with the heart. Some scholars have understood illumination as inspiration. The esoteric nature of these means of knowledge makes them non-reliable for building the base of *Shariah* on them and therefore in critical thinking they will be dismissed as they belong to the category of subjective knowledge. To this fact, for example, Al-Shatibi after some discussion holds that *Shariah* cannot be built on illumination (المكاشفة; *al-mukashafah*) (Al-Shatibi, 1992, Vol.1, pp.271-2). Al-Shatibi further says that the incident about O Syariah as mentioned above, even if proved authentic, does not amount to provide any injunction of *Shariah* (Al-Shatibi, 1997, Vol.4 p.472).

### Critical Thinking, Diligence, and Providence

Critical thinkers are at levels and stages. It is because of the level of knowledge a person has and the capacity of understanding and

thinking he possesses. The Quran states "... whereas if they had referred it to the messenger and such of them as are in authority, those among them who are able to think (يستنبطونه; *yastanbitoonahu*) out the matter would have known it. ..." (The Quran, 4:83). Those "who are able to think" sets them apart from ordinary people. The Messenger says, "May Allāh cause his face to shine, the man who hears what I say and conveys it (to others). Many of those who have knowledge but no understanding, and many who convey knowledge to those who have more understanding of it than they do" (At-Tirmidhī, 1975, Vol.5 p.34).

The subject of critical thinking at the present could be understood by its definition by Pascarella and Terezini (1991) as following, "critical thinking ... typically involves the individual's ability to do some or all of the following: identify central issues and assumptions in an argument, recognize important relationships, make correct inferences from data, deduce conclusions from information or data provided, interpret whether conclusions are warranted on the basis of the data given, and evaluate evidence or authority" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 118).

An envisioned Islamic concept of critical thinking includes both religious and worldly matters. Therefore, pure intentionality, diligence, and providence are important elements of being excellent at critical thinking.

Higher understanding and wisdom (والحكمة التفقهه; *al tafakuh wal alhikmah*) puts a critical thinker at a more prominent stage. According to the Islamic perspective, there is a difference between being a knowledgeable person, having facts and information on hand or in memory, and understanding or being a wise person. The higher understanding (التفقهه; *at-tafaqquh*) and wisdom (الحكمة; *al-hikmah*) can come as God-given gift and as a product of diligence and intelligence. The messenger says “If Allāh wants to do good to a person; he makes him comprehend the religion ....” (Al-Bukhārī, 2001, Vol. 1, p.25). And according to the Quran the men of understanding are “Those who listen to the Word, and follow the best of it: those are the ones who Allāh has guided, and those are the ones endowed with understanding” (The Quran, 39:18). The wisdom is also God-given as the Quran states, “He grants wisdom to whom He pleases; and he to whom wisdom is granted receives indeed a benefit overflowing; but none will grasp the Message but men of understanding” (The Quran, 2: 269). The elements of diligence, persistence, and invoking God’s providence are mentioned in the Prophetic narrations as the Messenger says, “A believer is never satiated with gainful knowledge; he goes acquiring it till his death and entry into Paradise” (At-Tirmidhī, 1975, Vol.5 p.50). And among supplications mentioned in the Quran is, “...My Lord, increase me in knowledge” (The Quran, 20:114).

Though wisdom and higher understanding are special qualities of those who are at a higher level of critical thinking, it does not mean that whatever they establish should be without proof. This higher level of critical and creative thinking could be seen in the geniuses and famous scholars of Islam such as famous authorities and scholars of the Quran, Hadith, Fiqh, Kalam, Philosophy, History, etc. Besides, it is possible that subjective knowledge - prophetic dreams (الرؤيا الصادقة; *al-ruya al-sadiqah*), insight (الفراسة; *al-firasah*), illumination (المكاشفة; *al-mukashafah*), and inspiration (الالهام; *al-ilham*)- as discussed earlier may have its role in being part of an excellent and extraordinary critical mind in understanding, discovering, and creativity, though not being on its merit a piece of evidence or a premise for an argument.

#### **Demonstrative and Subjective Knowledge**

There is a distinction between demonstrative and subjective knowledge. And this distinction is made on the means of knowledge as mentioned earlier. Demonstrative knowledge is verifiable by using proper means of knowledge. In short, it includes the knowledge of the revelation and all those types of knowledge that could be verified by rational and empirical means. The Shariah is based on this type of knowledge and as an implication, it provides a foundation for critical thinking. Muslims are generally required to follow Islam and its understanding that could be evaluated by these verifiable means of knowledge.

Whereas types of subjective knowledge are not verifiable by the public, their acceptance depends on the choice of their beholders; however, there is a limit on expressing or dissemination of such knowledge that it should not be against the revealed knowledge. Furthermore, no consequences from such knowledge should follow that may adversely affect any personal or public interest. In other words, there is no obedience of what may amount to the disobedience to God and the Messenger. As it is mentioned in the Hadith, “There is no obedience to any human being if it involves disobedience of Allāh” (Ibn Ḥanbal, 2001, vol. 2, p.318).

### Encouragement from the Quranic for Critical Thinking

The Quran discourages belief in superstitions, wishful thinking, doubt, conjecture, unfounded guessing, etc. Concepts like contemplation (التفكر; *al-tafakur*), (التدبر; *at-tadabbur*), understanding (التفقه; *at-tafaqquh*), and reasoning (التعقل; *at-taakul*) are used in many places in the Quran. These concepts can be elaborated and developed with techniques; however, they remain seminal as roots and principles for thinking. These words themselves by their nature refer to understanding, analyzing, conceptualizing, being critical, etc.

#### 7.1. Contemplation (التفكر; *al-tafakur*)

The Quran encourages people to reflect. It encourages reflecting upon the heavens and the creation of God. The Quran states, “Men who celebrate the praises of Allāh, standing,

sitting, and lying down on their sides, and contemplate (يتفكرون; *yatafakkaroon*) the (wonders of) creation in the heavens and the earth...” (The Quran, 3:191). To reflect on parables and stories, the Quran states, “...So relate the story; perchance they may reflect (يتفكرون; *yatafakkaroon*)” (The Quran, 7:176). And, “... We explain the Signs in detail for those who reflect (يتفكرون; *yatafakkaroon*)” (The Quran, 10:24).

#### 2. Reflection (التدبر; *at-tadabbur*)

The Quran encourages reflecting on the Quran itself as a divine text as it states, “Do they not consider (يتدبرون; *yatadabbaroon*) the Quran (with care)? Had it been from other Than Allāh, they would surely have found therein Much discrepancy” (The Quran, 4:82) and “Do they not ponder (يتدبروا; *yaddabbaroo*) over the Word (of Allāh), or has anything (new) come to them that did not come to their fathers of old?” (The Quran, 23:68); moreover, “(Here is) a Book which We have sent down unto thee, full of blessings, that they may mediate (يتدبروا; *yatadabbaroo*) on its Signs, and that men of understanding may receive admonition” (The Quran, 38:29).

#### 3. Understanding (التفقه; *at-tafaqquh*)

Understanding is the higher stage in knowing. The Quran encourages Muslims to understand their religion, there should be certain people to dedicate themselves to this task as the Quran states, “Nor should the Believers all go forth together: if a contingent from every

expedition remained behind, they could devote themselves to studies (تفقهوا; *tafaqqahoo*) in religion, and admonish the people when they return to them,- that thus they (may learn) to guard themselves (against evil)” (The Quran, 9:122).

#### 4. Reasoning (التعقل; *at-taakul*)

The reasoning is mentioned many times in the Quran. The Quran encourages people to use their reasoning in understanding the natural phenomenon and cosmology. The Quran states, “Behold! in the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the night and the day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which Allāh Sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds which they Trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth;- (Here) indeed are Signs for a people that are wise (يعقلون; *ya'qiloon*)” (The Quran, 2:164) and God reveals his words and signs so people may reason as the Quran states, “Thus doth Allāh Make clear His Signs to you: In order that ye may understand (تعقلون; *ta'qiloon*)” (The Quran, 2:242).

**Conclusion:**

Critical thinking has its rich history in Islamic scholarship; however, there is a need of turning it into a disciplined subject, and researching the subject has become a necessity in contemporary time and its scope is predicted to rise in the future. Though, critical thinking is now being encouraged almost at every higher seat of learning as being the implicit and sometimes explicit part of the syllabus and curriculum, yet any universalization of the foundations and principles of the subject can have adverse effects on those who do not share the same world view which dominates the mainstream academia such as materialism, scientism, and secularization of knowledge. In this regard, this paper provided some of the basics which can be part of any project, curriculum, or syllabus of critical thinking on Islamic lines. The important element of such critical thinking is to give the right place and space for revelation as a source of knowledge and to develop a well-disciplined scholarly inquiry based on the Islamic concept of knowledge and practicing, developing, and being creative about the various ways which are encouraged by the Quran, demanding and advising human beings to use their special faculties and qualities that can lead to better judgments, right choices, and the truth.

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