

Islamic Philosophy, Prophetic Intelligence, and the AI Agenda

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INTRODUCTION

In my article titled ‘The Clash of Artificial and Natural Intelligences: Will It Impoverish Wisdom?’, which appeared in the 2023 issue of *The Muslim 5001*, I made the following concluding statement: “... it is imperative to pursue an AI agenda that would not be in destructive conflict with NI. Not only that, contemporary man needs to be reminded of the intelligence that defines his humanness and the role of the prophetic intelligence as the model to be emulated.” The present article is pursuing this same theme of clash of the two intelligences that we now come to realize as unprecedented in the history of human civilization, both in terms of its nature and its scope. But this time the discussion is further explaining the meanings of the two imperatives mentioned in the quote and their implications for contemporary human civilization.

Let me now rephrase the first imperative in the form of a fully loaded question: how can we pursue an AI agenda that to all intents and purposes would serve humanity by delivering societal and civilizational goods and countering social ills in innovative ways that would at least minimize destructive consequences on the present humanity and its civilization, if not altogether eliminate them? And let me also rephrase the second imperative in the form of a no less loaded question: how can we persuade and impress upon present humanity to listen to and appreciate the precious message embodied in the traditional idea of prophetic intelligence and draw the necessary conclusions from it? This article attempts to put forward several important ideas that may help us formulate some key answers to these two questions.

For Muslims, the two stated imperatives, which in our opinion are civilizational in scale, are integral to the Qur’an’s social philosophy. In Qur’anic terms, “delivering societal and civilizational goods” would be acts of honouring the social principle of *amr bi’l-ma’ruf* while “countering social ills” is to honour the principle of *nahy ‘an al-munkar*.² Furthermore, the idea of technology as a tool of human progress as

opposed to the idea of man as a servant of technology or the idea of technology as an end in itself—a simple but precious message from traditional civilizations that has fast disappeared from the screen of modern consciousness—is a very important integral element of the Qur’an’s social philosophy. The issue of ethics of technology, a novel example of which is what we have just raised in relation to the possible, and indeed already visible misuses of AI, may easily be seen in Islam as part of a much broader epistemological concern: namely, the ethics of knowledge. Islamic ethics of knowledge is best summed up in this well-known prophetic instruction: “Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave,” and: “Seek knowledge even as far as China.” But only “seek knowledge that is beneficial” and at the same time “seek God’s protection from knowledge that is unbeneficial.”

Beneficial knowledge is traditionally understood in Islam as any knowledge that would contribute to the affirmation of two fundamental revealed truths. These truths are: first, the principle of Divine Unity (*al-tawhid*); and second, the principle of Divine Law (*al-shariah*)³, understood as the foundation of a just and balanced socio-political, or better still civilizational order. The latter principle may also be understood as the principle of Divine Justice since the essence of the Divine shariah is justice for both the human and natural orders. The domain of such knowledge is indeed vast, and in fact unlimited, since both unity and justice are in the natures of things. And the opposite of beneficial knowledge, that is, the unbeneficial or useless kind, is any idea or knowledge claim that negates or undermines these twin truths or that is indifferent to their epistemological demands. From the perspective of the two truths, such kind of knowledge is far *limited* in scope, and yet some humans prefer to indulge in it.

It is in the light of this understanding of the concept of useful and useless knowledge that contemporary Muslim discourse on the AI agenda should be conducted. And it is with such an awareness that we need to ask ourselves this very fundamental question: is the AI Agenda going to enhance our appreciation

1 *The Muslim 500*, 2023, pp. 218-222.

2 See Qur’an, Aal Imran, 3:104. The phrase *amr bi’l-ma’ruf* literally means “enjoining what is known to be good” while the phrase *nahy ‘an al-munkar* has the literal meaning of “prohibiting what is evil”.

3 Islam sees the affirmation of these twin truths as the *raison d’être* of every prophetic mission in human spiritual history. See Qur’an, Al-Ma’idah, 5:48.

of cosmic unity of which human unity is an integral part and, more importantly, our appreciation of the divine unity of which this cosmic unity is a reflection?⁴ Or will it destroy the unity of the human order as a result of the havoc it wreaks on the human microcosm through uncontrolled technological innovations, and hence destroy the idea of cosmic unity itself? Consequently, with the unity of the human and cosmic orders shattered, does the AI Agenda not render incomprehensible or meaningless the pursuit of knowledge of divine unity? From the Islamic perspective, all these questions pertaining to the benefits and harm, and merits and demerits of AI, are issues with profound implications. We would only ignore them at the peril of the ummah.

THE CONCEPT OF PROPHETIC INTELLIGENCE

The most fundamental of the big ideas we have in mind in this discussion is the idea of prophetic intelligence, the very concept of intelligence that is needed to remind us that it is the prototype of our humanity and our own ideal in life. By prophetic intelligence Muslim philosophers who were deeply immersed in its study understand it to mean human intelligence in its most perfect form, which they took efforts to explain. In other words, it is the most developed form of intelligence that can possibly be attained by the human mind. The Muslim philosopher Al-Farabi (870 CE–950 CE) identifies this super intelligence with the class of persons traditionally known as prophets. In Islam, the technical term for prophet is *nabiy*, which is known to have a precise and generally accepted meaning unlike the word “prophet” in the English language, which is known to have a rather loose meaning in its general usage.

The essential meaning of “prophet” as understood in the Qur’an refers to someone who is a recipient of divine revelation (*wahy*) through the intermediary role of the Archangel Gabriel. It seems clear that the Prophet Muhammad (salutation and peace be upon him) understood the word “prophet” in this precise sense when he mentioned that God sent 124,000 prophets to mankind beginning with Adam (peace be upon him) and ending with himself. Numerically, this special group of people constitutes a minute fraction of mankind and yet in influence and impact they are the real shapers of human history. They were able to accomplish their earthly feats thanks largely

to their super intelligence. It is thus not without good reason that some Muslim philosophers chose to devote their intellectual efforts to the study of prophetic intelligence.

The definition of prophet (*nabiy*) as recipient of divine revelation raises the issue of the interrelationship between the well-known triad: namely, Allah, Gabriel, and the Prophet Muhammad. At the popular level the interrelationship between the three entities is only understood in general terms or accepted as a matter of faith. But at a more intellectual level the issue of the interrelationship in question requires an understanding of why the three entities are to be viewed as the most fundamental triad underlying the Islamic belief system. The requirement for such an understanding becomes obvious when we realize that the first four out of six Islamic articles of faith are incorporated into the meanings of the triad. Islamic philosophy pursues the understanding by delving deeper into the meaning of revelation and prophethood beyond the popular understanding of the doctrines. One of the main aspects of this deeper meaning pertains to the nature and characteristics of prophetic intelligence that we argue will help define the limits of AI and thereby restore epistemological order into its contemporary discussion—something that is increasingly viewed by philosophers of ideas as in a state of utter conceptual confusion.

In our view, this confusion has largely arisen from an uncritical acceptance of ideas and concepts pertaining to intelligence, and more specifically of the human type that are floating around in abundance these days. One noteworthy source of such confusion is *transhumanism*, the contemporary American socio-philosophical movement advocating human transformations through intelligence engineering, which I have discussed in my previous article cited earlier. This uncritical acceptance of ideas surrounding AI speaks much about the state of ignorance of many people in the contemporary world about man’s past knowledge of his own natural NI as accumulated and preserved in various philosophical traditions of the world. It is mainly in response to the state of confusion surrounding the issue of the comparative worth of NI and AI that the idea of prophetic intelligence is sought to be discussed in this article. We further argue that the idea of prophetic intelligence ought to serve as our definitive source of an all-embracing theory of human and artificial intelligences in which the real potential and the veritable role of

⁴ In one verse the Qur’an speaks of cosmic unity as proof of divine unity, meaning that the former unity reflects the latter. See Qur’an, Al-Anbiyyah, 21:22.

each is clearly discerned and spelt out. In this way the legitimate role of AI may be defined and promoted without doing injustice to NI, which logic itself tells us is a necessary condition for the sound development of AI.

It is to the Islamic philosophical tradition that we turn for inspiration and help in articulating a solid and coherent theory of prophetic intelligence. The main reason for our choice is simple. It may be cogently argued that Islamic philosophy provides the best rational approach to an exposition of prophetic intelligence for the very purpose of this article. The rational approach in question is viewed as universal and scientific, the meaning of which is now explained. To begin with, it is pertinent to emphasize that such an approach is none other than that of the Qur'an itself. To underline its universal approach, the Qur'an refers to the long line of prophets in human spiritual history, who were sent to all branches of the human family⁵ to spread the same message of divine unity.⁶ These scriptural data pertaining to the divine appointment of prophets from all communities or nations allow us to speak of the Qur'an as championing the universal idea of prophetic institution that is grounded on the common message of divine unity and justice of the divine law. Rather central to this spiritual institution is the universal teaching of prophetic intelligence in which light we may hope to better understand the limits of both human natural intelligence and AI. Islamic philosophy takes the same revealed data as source of their inspiration to formulate a universal theory of prophetic intelligence. The first such theory to be presented in detail was formulated by Al-Farabi.⁷

Islamic philosophy's exposition of prophetic intelligence is not only universal but also scientific. Since the word scientific is understood and used in several senses, a clarification of its usage is called for. In current popular usage the word is understood in the limited sense of empirical study of the world of nature that is based on physical observation and experimentation. Thus, the validity or legitimacy of the term is dictated by the field and method of study. In academia, however, a wider meaning is granted to the term to include the social sciences, and to a small extent the humanities. But while in this case the field for scientific investigation has been widened, the same

empirical method of study is in use. Worth comparing, it is in the Islamic intellectual tradition that the notion of scientific enjoys its broadest usage that cuts across diverse objects and methods of study. Here in this tradition, it is possible to speak with unambiguity and coherence of a science of divine reality and a science of angels in the same way that it is possible to speak of the sciences of minerals, plants, animals, and human beings. In the same breath, along with empirical methods, Islamic epistemology speaks of the non-empirical ones, including mathematical, linguistic, metaphysical, and symbolical methods and scriptural exegesis. Islamic philosophy views all these different methods as scientific (*ilmiiyyah*) in nature.

In pursuing a scientific approach to the study of prophetic intelligence, Islamic philosophy seeks to faithfully emulate the Qur'an's scientific spirit as expressed in the concept of *burhan*, which carries the meaning of clear and convincing proof. The noun *burhan* occurs eight times in the Qur'an where it is used to denote convincing proofs that either come from God⁸ or are to be furnished by deniers of the truth in support of their counterclaims.⁹ Al-Farabi (870 CE – 950 CE), Ibn Sina (980 CE – 1037 CE), Ibn Rushd (1126 CE – 1198 CE), Qutb Al-Din Al-Shirazi (1236 CE – 1311 CE) and other members of the Peripatetic school of Islamic philosophy adopted the term *al-burhan* to denote their idea of scientific method, which they argued is the best of all logical methods when it comes to the task of delivering to the human mind knowledge that is characterized as certain (*ilm al-yaqin*). They understood *burhan* to mean a demonstrative proof. According to Al-Farabi, demonstrative proof is the most certain kind of proof since assent to its premises is of the degree of certainty, the highest possible. The certain and excellent nature of *burhan* is derived from the certain nature of its premises.¹⁰ Al-Farabi views revealed data and sense-data as reliable premises for demonstrative proofs. Thus, significantly, Islamic philosophy accepts an integrated and unified theological and empirical approach to the study of prophetic intelligence, which confers it with some kind of independent authority to critically examine and judge the epistemological claims of AI.

Another related term in the Qur'an is *bi'l-haqq*, which conveys its scientific spirit when addressing

5 Qur'an, Al-Ra'd, 13:7.

6 Qur'an, Ibrahim, 21:25.

7 For Al-Farabi's theory see Osman Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1998), Chapter 2.

8 Qur'an, for example, Al-Nisaa', 4:174.

9 Qur'an, for example, Al-Baqarah, 2:111.

10 Osman Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam*, p. 85.

ontological and cosmological issues relating to the different orders of reality. The term *bi'l-haqq* means in truth or with the truth. This term occurs many times in the Qur'an. Its basic meaning is "in conformity with the truth", which is traditionally understood as referring to knowledge at various levels. At its highest metaphysical level, the truth refers to the knowledge of Divine Unity, while the lowest level of truth is identified with knowledge of biophysical reality, the essence of which is knowledge of the four principles of causality. Muslim philosopher-scientists hold in high esteem this knowledge of the principles of causality—the material, formal, efficient, and final causes—which they view as scientific. The concept of final cause is especially significant for our present discussion on science since it affirms the relevance of the idea of purpose to the study of nature. In fact, one of the meanings of *bi'l-haqq* is the idea of purpose of

everything that exists in the cosmos. As applied to the study of intelligence, its purposive dimension needs to be given due treatment as exemplified by Islamic philosophy.

ENGAGING AI WITH THE HELP OF PROPHETIC INTELLIGENCE

According to a prophetic hadith, the first thing created by God was intelligence (*aql*). This is the universal intelligence (*al-aql al-kulliy*) that is metaphysical and luminous in nature and that is yet to be reflected in the mirror of cosmic existence at various levels of its hierarchic reality and in multiple forms. The complete Islamic cosmos as shaped by the Qur'an and the prophetic hadiths stretches downwards from this heavenly universal intelligence to the lowest earthly intelligence through the angelic intelligences. It dis-

AI generated art using this article's title as a prompt



plays an orderly, beautiful, and majestic hierarchy of intelligences in which the place and role of human intelligence is rather unique. There is thus the cosmic ocean of intelligence in which our human intelligence is placed and functions and of which we should always be conscious when talking about its powers and potentials. Human intelligence alone possesses characteristics that are partly heavenly and partly earthly. Its powers appear limitless, but man's uncontrolled earthly desires and ambitions have also made real the corruption of his intelligence.

As the first and the most perfect creature that preceded and originated all other intelligent creatures, the universal intelligence may be viewed as the immediate principle of the cosmos. Since based on the Qur'an and hadiths the Prophet is regarded as not just the best human but also as the best creature (*khayr al-khalq*) and hence more specifically as the most perfect and the most excellent of all creaturely intelligences, human and non-human. Some philosophers and Sufis have identified the intellect of the Prophet with this universal intelligence. Accordingly, this universal intelligence became known within the Islamic universe as the Muhammadan Intellect. The implication of this Muslim philosophical teaching for the contemporary AI discourse is obvious. From the perspective of the Muhammadan prophetic intelligence, which defines the limits of creaturely intelligence, all attempts to create an intelligence that would be superior to the human intelligence as such will be doomed to failure from the start. This is because the best of human creation will still fall within the creaturely realm. As such, it could not surpass the perfection of the Muhammadan prophetic intelligence.

Dreamers of an AI utopia may be deeply disappointed to hear such a conclusion and may choose to ignore it. But the idea of prophetic intelligence is there in the Islamic tradition to remind ourselves of the numerous possibilities of intellectual development and advancement and mind transformations that are open to our natural intelligence. We do not deny the possibility of man creating intelligent machines that could outperform man in doing certain types of works. That possibility should be explored in

the name of technology at the service of man. But we argue that the issue of such a possibility is altogether of a different kind from the issue of intelligence transformation as conceived by the transhumanists that, in our view, threatens the traditional idea of humanness and thus the very existence of the human species itself.

More generally, the AI agenda of exploring "the machine in man" with all its technological possibilities may be viewed as still falling within the ethically permissible realm. However, in undertaking this exploration there is something that can be learned from Islamic philosophy, particularly Al-Farabi's comprehensive theory of intelligence. The theory, we argue, does justice to both natural intelligence and AI. It explains the various stages of intelligence transformation from childhood to adulthood culminating in the attainment of what Al-Farabi calls the acquired intellect (*al-aql al-mustafad*),¹¹ which is the most developed form of the human intellect. In principle, this possibility is open to every human being, which makes the quest for it democratic. This superior intellect has the power to think about itself and its knowledge content without having any more to depend on new empirical and rational data. But this intellect admits of degrees of perfection. Al-Farabi defines prophetic intellect as the acquired intellect in its most perfect form, which has the distinction of being in frequent contact with Gabriel. That distinction is a matter of divine choice, not human. As the Qur'an says, "But Allah will choose for His special mercy whom He wills."¹²

Al-Farabi's theory is relevant to the exploration of the machine in man through his discussion of man's five imaginative powers that are associated with his five internal senses. These are the powers of formal representation (*al-musawwirah*), estimation (*al-wahm*), memory (*al-hafidhah*), animal compositive imagination (*al-mutakhayyilah*), and human compositive imagination (*al-mufakkirah*). In my view, if at all AI can emulate and even surpass the powers of human intelligence, it would in this domain of the internal senses but would remain limited to their machine-like dimension.

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11 The literal meaning of this word is "acquired intelligence or intellect". The acquired intellect is so-called because it is attained through human efforts based on healthy development of the naturally endowed human intelligence and not through artificial interventions.

12 *The Qur'an*, Al-Baqarah, 2:105.