

Innate Intelligence; Western Enlightenment

Innate intelligence, in Arabic, is referred to as عقل-aqal, but just exactly what aqal happens to be is never made clear at all, and due in no short part to all the flowery definitions and metaphors used to describe it. In fact, in a humorous way, trying to pin-down a clear meaning for it, in Arabic anyway, seems to betray more an inherent ignorance of it.

Here in the Western World, however, although no such emphasis is placed on attempting to define or to deconstruct the notion of aqal, there is, instead, an emphasis placed on developing it to a point where, for each and every individual who so desires it, their innate intelligence can be honed to a very high degree of what in the Eastern World is called “الإكمال - completion; perfection,” and doing so is both made possible and accomplished through what is referred to as (getting an) education.

Education is a clear-cut idea, lauded in both the Eastern and the Western hemispheres, and, even insofar as our religious beliefs go, education is shown as something to which God, the Almighty سبحانه, Himself gives primacy. So, therefore, obviously, there is something very special that education helps to accomplish.

When we try to make sense of all the various ideas we have about education, however, some of what comes to mind usually has to do with the way in which education is presented to us-primarily through the tv commercials, or advertisements that a university puts out-that education is a goal/achievement, for which you can select from a bunch of different subjects and programs, and that, with added relevance to our post-covid-19 world, it is also something that can be done online.

At the end of the day, however, the whole point of education is said not to be so much the actual material or program that you end up studying, but rather the *transferrable skills* that you gain which are touted as the real and true point behind it. But, speaking frankly, it can take people years after they have gotten an education and graduated to really appreciate the transferrable skills which they have gained.

And, just what are those skills?

To really boil it down to just *some* of the core ones, the skills that an education helps to sharpen are essentially the same ones as the inborn understanding, ie. innate intelligence, that one uses, for example, to understand what it means when they get a bill in the mail.

Yes. Once holding a monthly bill in their hand (eg. for electricity, credit card, phone, internet, insurance, etc.), people *automatically* know the following:

1. This bill shows what they owe, usually to the company who sent it to them.
2. The amount on this bill, if they don't pay all of it off right now, they will likely be charged interest on it, and have to pay a bit more on top, if the payments are dragged out over a longer period of time, with the ominous threat of a bad credit rating possibly being tacked on to their name for other companies to see.
3. If they do pay it all off right away, it will mean that they will have to cut back on something else, by the same amount they pay off, and so, for example, they may not be able to get their grandma a present for her 85th birthday, and/or be able to “pimp their ride,” like they may have been wanting to.

The three points mentioned above, *the three levels of thought*, because of one's innate intelligence, happen in the form of a bunch of quick thoughts-which seem to come all at once-in one's mind, but in an intuitive way, ie. without much effort being put into it. That is, as soon as you see your bill, you know what it means for you money-wise, in your particular situation.

In doing so, such thoughts betray their underlying basis, which just so happens to be the same sets of skills that every university department guarantees they will help to develop in their students: skills for critical thinking.

At university, the one consistent underlying idea that you will find professors trying to get across is that students should be able to stand on their own two feet, and figure things out for themselves, no matter what the project, problem, assignment, or essay it is that is thrown at them, and then to give a proper answer back, showing their professor(s) just how smart they really are at understanding what has been given to them.

This point applies to each and every single class, of each and every (legitimate) university program that is out there, and it applies as a mandate for our universities, here in the West, in particular.

Why? That is because the university which a student attends is on a mission, especially here in the West, to prepare a new generation of competent citizens who will help to guarantee that our (modern) world can continue to move forward, and to grow increasingly and prosper more and more.

But, to achieve that goal, our society needs to have educated minds that can think and understand independently, and on their own two feet, while (possibly) having to adapt to situations they may not have encountered before. They also need to do all this in a sound, and sensible way.

And that is what critical thinking means: to figure things out, independently, on one's own, in a sound and sensible way, even if caught in a tough situation for the first time ever.

Just as a quick example to prove this, think about the global response to the covid-19 pandemic for the past year, from March 2020 to March 2021, and how it has helped to mitigate the number of deaths and infections from the covid-19/

coronavirus that may have otherwise left the world with, literally, just a handful of people who were naturally immune, had some of us not been able to think critically, and properly react to fight the virus.

That is the power of education. *That* is the power of critical thinking. *That* is how our world keeps on keeping on.

To make things clearer about how education works, we can take a quick look at an example of a university-level lecture, but from a the point of view of a subject that doesn't rely on mathematics, or on complicated machinery and/or advanced concepts, and yet still gets our point across nice and clearly: the English Lit. program.

It may be surprising to learn that an English Lit. (short for Literature) program, at its core, teaches the same critical thinking skills that are on par with, and which also hold their own, against other university programs/majors like: Engineering, Science, Math, Social Science, Business, Political Science, and all the rest of them, too!

Don't be surprised. Look at it this way, at the end of the day, a university, aka an Alma Mater, awards degrees for *all* types of different degree programs. So then, doesn't it make sense that *all* the graduates that a university has, will, eventually, become the new generation of competent citizens who keep our world going?

Then, doesn't it also make sense that *each one* of those graduates, all from that same Alma Mater, should be able to figure things out, on their own, regardless of whichever major/program they had studied?

And also that they should all be able to do so *equally well*?

In a *sound and sensible* way?

Particularly if ever they are caught in a tough situation for the first time (ie. once they've become professionals in their particular field)?

It sure does!

So, just how does English Lit. instil critical thinking skills that are on par with all the other programs/degrees?

Let's take a quick look at the workings of a simple, typical Eng. Lit. class/lecture/lesson:

English Lit. teaches you how to analyze a piece of literature by taking it apart bit by bit in a way that, without knowing too much to start with, if you just follow three simple guidelines, you will end up generating knowledge, and creating (possibly) pages upon pages of substantial information, all based on just a (minimal amount of) information and text that has been provided to you.

For example, let's examine a short comical sketch in which there is a Charlie Chaplain type of a guy carrying an old, heavy doctor's handbag. This character wants to get into a very exclusive club, hence the fancy bag, but the bouncer standing out front is not impressed, and won't let him go in.

Our character, wanting to bribe the bouncer, looks in his bag, and takes out a bunch of worthless trinkets, one after another, with which he hopes to bribe the bouncer, but none of which impress that bouncer in the least. Having emptied out his bag, our character runs into a dead end. He grows disheartened, hangs his head in despair, turns around, and begins to walk away from the club in woe.

Then, as he is walking, a light bulb suddenly appears over his head, a big smile comes over his face, and he pivots around in mid-step towards the club. Putting on the saddest expression he can, he walks up pleadingly to the bouncer. The bouncer, seeing him head back, rolls his eyes, and shakes his head in disbelief.

Our character holds out one hand in front with his just index finger extended, as if begging the bouncer for one more chance, while in his other hand, which is extended tautly behind him, he gets a firm grip on his handbag. Then, as he gets to within about an arm's length of the bouncer, a sudden and loud whooshing sound is heard, followed just as quickly by a resounding clang, and then a deep thud.

We then see our character jump up and do a jovial heel clap as he dances his way in through the doors of the club, while the bouncer lies knocked out and face down on the ground, with a ring of alternating golden stars and chirping birds circling his head -The End-

Now, for "the meat and potatoes" of the matter, we will do an ultra-quick breakdown of the above sketch, and just as quick a wrap-up of our discussion.

First, though, we have to start by "giving props" to our prop from the sketch: the lightbulb.

Why the lightbulb?, you may wonder, well, if the importance of that lightbulb to our sketch didn't flick on for you just yet, don't worry, it will in a second because we shall jump right in, and pick away at all the difference that a tiny little lightbulb helped to make to our sketch.

1. The lightbulb, in our story above, is called a "Deus Ex Machina" device. It is a literary device, and its name translates as "God out of the machine." This device has to do with the history of writing itself, and it is not unique English literature. It is worked into a piece when a writer hits a road block, and needs a "quick fix" to help bring the story back on track. One can argue it's a type of "cheap trick," however, it works because it keeps the story going, especially in a comedy, even after the story had (technically) already ended. In ancient times, this device was a physical mechanism: a bucket hanging off of a pole/lever with an actor in it. The actor would make a loud declaration which'd alter the course of the stage play. Nowadays, a simple object can do that same job, and still packs that same punch.

2. The Deus Ex Machina device also helps to prevent the audience from having a bad experience in seeing a sketch end abruptly, and on a sad note. This is because, if the character didn't have any hope of getting into the club, that would end the story, and also possibly drag the audience down and drive them to tears. After all, they may, as an unintentional consequence of the writer's craft, actually sympathize/empathize with the misfortune of the character because they themselves may have faced similar situations in their own personal lives, and faced failure head-on, too. Yikes! It may sound a little too psychotic, but people, ie. audiences, can react to a simple sketch in unpredictable ways. Fortunately, that little lightbulb helps "turn a frown upside down," so to speak, and ends the sketch on a happy note: with the underdog getting the win, against all odds.

3. The Deus Ex Machina device, on a bigger, almost philosophical level, functions in human society by taking the form of social programs, charitable organizations, support groups/associations, telephone help-lines, etc., which essentially function much like the Deus Ex lightbulb does in our story: by helping "turn around" peoples lives, and getting them out of the (unfortunate) hardship(s) and/or dead-ends that they have run into. In this way, the Deus Ex Machina device can actually be understood more as a miracle and a blessing, rather than just as a "quick fix" or "cheap trick," because it helps real people in real situations, literally, "to turn their frowns upside down." In that respect, what is considered a literary device, when seen as an abstract idea, actually has a real-world application. Whether abstract or concrete in form, the Deus Ex Machina is inarguably a device that is very functional and effective.

What a lecture, hun? Pretty deep. Didn't think English Lit. could be so profound! And now, forthwith shall we harken to the finale...

So, what's the on-par part that Eng. Lit. has with all the other majors/degree programs?

Well, it's in the the *three levels of thought* in which we talk about the Deus Ex Machina device, and its also in the *three levels of thought* in which, at the very start of our discussion, we talked about looking at a bill you get in the mail; It all has to do with how you go about thinking of how something works, and about the effect that something has on *three different levels*:

First, what that something is *on its own* has to be examined (eg. a bill, a Deus Ex Machina device, a polynomial expression, a chemical formula, a scientific principle, etc.), along with how it works.

Second, what/how that something affects *the field/profession* from/in which it occurs, has to be examined and explained.

Third, what/how that something affects *human society* has to be examined and explained.

The Point:

By doing this type of analysis on any object/device/item/formula/concept/etc., without knowing too much to start with, if you just follow the simple *three levels of thought* strategy, you will end up generating knowledge, and creating (possibly) pages upon pages of information, all based just on the (minimal amount of) text/information that you have on hand.

Practicing this strategy over and over again will help sharpen your critical thinking skills a lot; that's what all those 3-4 years of stressful university tests and assignments, etc. which the professors give you help you to do (ie. within the field and scope of the particular major/degree program that you study, of course).

In fact, this process, ie. of education, works so well that you sharpen your innate intelligence, and become able to understand things independently, by yourself, while, if necessary, adapting to new situations that you may have never seen before. And, you'll also do it all in a sound and sensible way (NB: the grades that you get will show you just how soundly and sensibly you are able think critically: the higher the grade, the better your ability).

In this way, getting an education shapes you into a competent, contributing citizen who helps our (modern) world move forward, while guaranteeing its prosperity and growth, regardless of what your particular major/degree program of choice may be.

But, wait, because, although what we have been talking about may seem to be reasonable from a materialist (ie. non-religious) perspective, what does it have to do with why even God, the Almighty *س*, would encourage education? Answer: Everything!

Because the importance of education, insofar as how it helps develop skills in critical thinking on three different levels, and how such skills help our world to flourish and grow, there should be no doubt for us that it is these *same* reasons why God, the Almighty *س*, also encourages education, but in terms of our *spiritual development*.

You see, there is a big difference between handing a Holy Text to someone who will follow it blindly, versus handing it to someone who will think critically about it, analyze it, and then follow it whole-heartedly, with a firm, unwavering understanding, because they who independently critically analyze and understand the Holy Text will then go about bringing society in line with *God's vision* of how things should be, ie. God's utopia.

If you look at how things are right now, it seems to be that the typical way in which people in the Eastern hemisphere go about practicing religion is that they (arguably) just follow *blindly* along with whatever someone else tells them is (supposedly) what their religion is all about.

And, therefore, more often than not, they simply *imitate* the way in which that someone else, usually a high-ranking priest, goes about doing things in his life, because all (his) followers believe that his behaviour is, somehow, a type of "embodying" of the Wisdom of God, without realizing that what they are doing actually makes religion look more like a grown-up version of the "Simon Says" game.

So, then, what could possibly be the alternative option, so as to salvage the dignity of God's Word from being reduced to a children's game?

Well, if society needs educated people to keep it going, and if the Almighty also appreciates the value of education, then it would follow that: educated people, whom the Almighty appreciates, are also needed to keep religion going.

This is because people who can think critically about God's religion, and analyze it accordingly, will follow it wholeheartedly, and with the firm and unwavering understanding that they have achieved, independently, on their own two feet.

But, how can that be done?

Easily: through rebooting one's understanding of Islam by using one's innate intelligence, one's aqal... sharpened by Western Enlightenment.

Success and prosperity, always!

Your Brother in Faith,

SMH Razvi
02-01-2021

PS: It should be noted that, to be fair, that there's a lot more that Eng. Lit. teaches, ie. beyond just the three levels of analysis that we've only touched upon. But, nevertheless, this method/technique is a big chunk of what is involved in literary analysis. However, when looked at in an abstract way, this method of analysis can be fruitful, no matter what the situation or subject matter it is that is or needs to be analyzed. In that regard, usually focusing on the jargon, ie. the technical terms that are used in a given field of knowledge, and subjecting one term at a time of that jargon to such analyses, *will* yield fruitful results. The only caution to bear in mind is that, for a field or subject other than Eng. Lit., there is also more to know beyond just the three levels of thought technique. Still, this technique *does* have its merits.