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The search for knowledge

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As Muslims, we are asked to “seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave”. As a first step, it is essential to have clarity about our goals: “what is the knowledge we seek?”. Surprisingly, the definition of knowledge is a matter of ongoing debate and controversy.

To understand this better, it is useful to consider two categories – knowledge of the external world around us, and knowledge of our internal world. The two categories complement each other, and both are necessary for our personal and collective affairs.

It should be obvious that the methods required to pursue these two types of knowledge would be substantially different from each other.

The importance of knowledge is obvious, especially to Muslims. The knowledge provided by the teachings of Islam led ignorant and backwards Arabs to launch a civilization which dominated the planet for a thousand years.

[DRAP announces helpline against 'irregular' prices](https://nation.com.pk/02-May-2021/drap-announces-helpline-against-irregular-prices)

(<https://nation.com.pk/02-May-2021/drap-announces-helpline-against-irregular-prices>)

Knowledge can transform people and societies. Those who have knowledge are given respect and honour, while those without knowledge are considered ignorant fools, even if they have wealth and power.

For reasons detailed elsewhere, European conceptions about the nature of knowledge were distorted by a battle between Science and Religion which lasted for centuries, and was eventually won by Science.

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Because of this battle, the West came to the false and misleading view that science is the only reliable source of knowledge. This is certainly true about the external world, but completely false about our internal personal lives, which cannot be explored by standard scientific techniques.

The most important question we all face is: what is purpose of my life? Human action is goal oriented, and social science, or the study of human beings and societies, must necessarily attempt to understand the diverse goals which humans strive for. We can't understand human behaviour without understanding the goals of human action.

[Sindh reports 9 death, 888 new COVID-19 cases in last 24 hours](https://nation.com.pk/02-May-2021/sindh-reports-9-death-888-new-covid-19-cases-in-last-24-hours)
 (<https://nation.com.pk/02-May-2021/sindh-reports-9-death-888-new-covid-19-cases-in-last-24-hours>).

The victory of science over religion in Europe led to the emergence of the secular modern worldview, which provides an answer to this question which is dramatically in conflict with traditional teachings of all religions.

According to the secular modern view, created in opposition to the teachings of the Catholic Church, the universe came into being by a cosmic accident, and will perish in another.

Accordingly, our existence is accidental and our lives are meaningless. In this cold and cruel universe, everyone is free to set their own goals, and pursue them with whatever means he can, without any responsibility towards others, or any concerns beyond his present life. This worldview underlies modern economic theory, which assumes that all human beings seek to maximize the pleasure they obtain from consumption of material goods over their lifetime.

The western education that we have all received is built upon foundations which incorporate all of these ideas about our lives and purpose into their framework. As a result, we have been indoctrinated into ways of thinking which are exceedingly harmful, and create major obstacles to our search for knowledge. The idea that hedonism, the maximization of pleasure, is the goal of behavior for all human beings is manifestly false. Psychologists have discovered that actual human behavior is far more complex than simplistic assumptions upon which modern economic theory is based.

[Hamilton wins Portuguese Grand Prix: Formula 1](https://nation.com.pk/02-May-2021/hamilton-wins-portuguese-grand-prix-formula-1)
 (<https://nation.com.pk/02-May-2021/hamilton-wins-portuguese-grand-prix-formula-1>).

Even more importantly, human beings are intrinsically social, and acquisition and consumption of material goods is actually harmful to happiness and welfare when it is done at expense of social relations.

Research has established the Easterlin Paradox that massive amounts of increases in standards of living have no correlation with increases in life-satisfaction and human happiness.



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Winds of peace in Asia

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On China's Strongman

Both empirically and normatively, the idea that human beings seek to maximize pleasure derived from consumption, or that they should seek to do this, is definitely false.

Before we can start our journey towards the truth, it is necessary to unlearn a lot of false ideas that we have absorbed from our western education. The first of these is that science, or the knowledge of the external reality, is the only valid source of knowledge. In contrast, Aristotle said that "Know Thyself is the beginning of all wisdom". social science can't be done without understanding human behavior, and the best place to start the study of human behavior is by understanding our own behavior. Introspection yields deep insights not available to economists or behavioral psychologists who are concerned only with external and observable behavior. It is immediately obvious that we act according to diverse, complex, and conflicting motives, and no mathematical formulae could describe our behavior, because we are free to choose and change.

Budget to cover developmental projects, control inflation: PM
(<https://nation.com.pk/02-May-2021/gov-t-to-focus-on-developmental-projects-control-inflation-in-next-budget-pm>).

Similarly, we are not robots who can be programmed by stimulus and response, as behavioral psychologists believe. Our internal reality cannot be studied by scientific methods because our experiences, thoughts, and feelings are completely unique and one-of-a-kind.

The second idea that we must unlearn is the "Theory of happiness", which is at the heart of modern economics. If a cool and refreshing drink makes a hot and thirsty man very happy, he should not deduce that he has stumbled upon the formula for a lifetime of happiness. It would be very foolish of him to build a hot sauna next to a refrigerator stocked with cases of cola, and market it as the ultimate pleasure machine. The economists' idea that the purpose of our lives is maximization of the utility of lifetime consumption is equally foolish. Consumption and acquisition of material goods provide short run happiness but have zero correlation with long-term happiness. Long run happiness depends not on consumption, but rather on cultivation of character traits like gratitude, contentment, and compassion, as well as cultivation of social relationships – loving, and being loved.

Has cryptocurrencies' charm changed our perspective on money?
(<https://nation.com.pk/02-May-2021/has-cryptocurrencies-charm-changed-our-perspective-on-money>).

The third idea that we must unlearn is about the importance of scientific knowledge. The dominance of technical subjects like chemistry, biology, physics, mathematics, etc. in western education leads to the impression that these are of the greatest importance.

A little reflection will show that these have no bearing on our daily lives. At the same time, western education neglects issues of maximal importance, like spiritual and emotional growth, and developing desirable character traits like generosity and courage while getting rid of undesirable characteristics like stinginess, envy, and malice. The dilemma for seekers of knowledge is that they do not have the

(<https://nation.com.pk/12-Mar-2018/on-china-s-strongman>).

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Zia's disciples

(<https://nation.com.pk/12-Mar-2018/zia-s-disciples>).

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Prime time dramas are not for young children

(<https://nation.com.pk/12-Mar-2018/prime-time-dramas-are-not-for-young-children>).

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(<https://www.nawaiwaqt.com.pk/epaper>).

knowledge required to evaluate claims of expertise. There are many different sources of many different types of knowledge, all of whom claim to have the secret of success. How can we choose among them? The Bible advises us to judge the tree by the fruit it bears. We cannot evaluate knowledge, but we can evaluate the impact of the knowledge on the lives of the bearers of knowledge – though only to a certain, limited, extent. The limitations arise because character traits and spiritual growth cannot be seen or sensed, except by those with sufficient empathy and sensitivity.

Let us look then at the impact of the teachings of Islam on the Arabs, who were among the most primitive people on the planet. Great Civilizations existed next to them among the Chinese, the Persians, the Romans, and the Egyptians.

But the teaching of Islam propelled them to world leadership, and changed the character of the Arabs from semi-savages who buried their daughters alive, to those filled with compassion and mercy for all of the creation of God, emulating our Holy Prophet Hazrat Muhammad SAW.

In contrast, consider the effect of a Western education, which produces scientists who can prepare atom bombs without feeling responsible, politicians who do cost-benefit calculations involving trading lives of millions of dead bodies for control over oil, and biologists who create terminating seeds so that corporations can make profits from the hungry and the poor.

It is obvious that Western education cannot create character, since it is concerned purely with external reality, and cannot touch our hearts and souls. In particular, economics degrades human lives by equating their value to lifetime earnings, and transforming humans into resources for the production of wealth. The teachings of Islam transformed the character of the early Muslims, who went on to change the world. These teachings have the same power today. The Quran teaches us that saving one life is like saving the entire humanity. This paradox can be understood in terms of the capabilities hidden within each human being. Just like a seed has the potential to grow into a tree and produce millions of seeds, so there is amazing potential buried within each human soul. So the question of burning importance for all of us is: How can we develop this potential within us, and develop our capabilities to their fullest extent? This, and not the accumulation of wealth, or the search for pleasure, is the purpose of our lives.

The first step towards the unfolding, or the development, of our potentials is to emulate our Holy Prophet Hazrat Muhammad SAW., who was sent as a Mercy to the Worlds. We must open our hearts to the suffering and sorrows of all of the creation. Paradoxically, the ability to feel pain is closely tied to the ability to feel joy. To the extent that we deaden our hearts to others, we also lose the ability to feel genuine joy. Thus both our worldly happiness and our spiritual progress depend on the opening of our hearts.

The second step in the acquisition of knowledge is struggle. It is only in the process of engaging with the world, struggling to achieve desirable outcomes, that we will be given the knowledge that we seek. We have to become active participants in the battle for the good; we cannot be neutral and detached observers, and hope to gain knowledge. This is again in conflict with Western ideas, which teach the opposite.

POLL

Should the government and opposition work together on passing electoral reforms?

- YES
- NO
- DON'T KNOW

VOTE

The third lesson in the methodology for the acquisition of knowledge is that the process matters, and not the outcome. At every moment, there is the right action to take, the one which brings us closer to God. If we take that action, then we have done the best deed, and we have already achieved success, by choosing the right act. Whether or not the desired outcome occurs is not relevant for our success or failure. This way of thinking is radically different from the teachings of economics, which is highly consequentialist; only the outcomes/consequences matter, and the process by which they were obtained do not.

The fourth lesson is to cultivate within ourselves the passion for acquiring knowledge. The secret of the rise of Islam was the stress it placed on acquisition of knowledge. The ink of the scholars was worth more than the blood of the martyrs. The angels spread their wings beneath the feet of the one who sets out from his home in search of knowledge. The exhortations to learn inspired the Muslims to seek knowledge from all over the world, which was the secret to the extraordinary rise of the Islamic Civilization.

The fifth lesson is to acquire confidence. Centuries of colonization by the West as well as their tremendous technological achievements have resulted in an inferiority complex. We must recognize that knowledge of machines does not create insights into the hearts of men, and we are the best experts on the problems of our own society. We must acquire confidence in ourselves, our heritage and traditions, and in our faith, as being the source of solutions of human problems today, as it was in the past.

The sixth lesson is the plurality of knowledge. Human lives are complex and multidimensional, and understanding them requires the ability to see the same matter from multiple points of view. This requires the ability to lay aside our personal baggage and step into the shoes of others, to see alternative perspectives. Since all human beings have their own unique perspectives, analysis of humans and societies requires the ability to see multiple points of view.

The seventh and last lesson for today is to examine carefully the sources and heritage of the knowledge that we are acquiring. Digging into the origins of knowledge reveals deep insights not available in the binary approach, which merely evaluates whether something is true or false. For example, take today's concerns with governance. Obviously this is a good thing, and worth having, but the question is Why and How did this topic acquire the importance it has today? When we investigate this, we find that the topic rose to prominence when the World Bank programs failed to deliver the promised results. All over the world, the structural adjustment programmes resulted in rise in poverty, social and political strains, and very poor growth. In order to escape the increasing chorus of blame, the World Bank found a scapegoat. The problem lay not in the programmes, but in the poor governance which did not allow the World Bank programs to succeed. In fact, if we can rise above the inferiority complex generated by centuries of colonial rule, we can see that governance in the USA is just as bad, if not worse, than that of Pakistan. The Senators and Congressmen are just as corrupt, if not more, than our much maligned Parliamentarians.

