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Reason, Rationality ('aql), and Moral Action in the Qur'an

This paper examines the concept of 'rationality' ('aql) in the Qur'an and explores the relationship between thinking, feeling, and moral action in the text. It argues that in the Qur'an, thinking properly involves feeling properly, and the proper mental/emotional orientation is proven through moral action. This paper will show that the Qur'anic concept of thinking is rooted in its late antique context and is fundamentally different from popular modern conceptions. In the modern period, it is common to distinguish between rational thought, emotions, and actions. Feeling or emotion might be considered to be irrational and uncontrollable; one's mind might be considered to act independently of those emotions. A person in this conception could be intellectually brilliant but emotionally illiterate. Equally, intellectual brilliance is considered to be separate from action. An 'evil genius' can be brilliant but entirely immoral in their actions. In the Qur'an, there is no 'evil genius'. Immoral action is a sign of lack of true intellect, understanding, and feeling. Intellect is conceived of, fundamentally, as moral understanding. In this model, one's thoughts, emotions, and actions are intertwined, and all are treated as a part of the overall practices or habits of virtuous behaviour. That virtuous behaviour, in turn, is outlined in commands in the Qur'an (the 'law').

The Qur'anic model relates to notions that were widespread in late antiquity. As in other late antique texts, the heart is the locus of both thinking and feeling. Paul Dilley (*Monasteries and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Christianity*, 2017), has shown that fourth-and-fifth century Egyptian monasticism involved 'heart-work', spiritual exercises focused on training the emotions and the mind, and he considers emotionally virtuous practices such as 'fear of God' to be an aspect of cognitive discipline. In this conception, 'mental states' include emotional states and 'propositional attitudes' such as 'belief' (p. 13 *et passim*). The Qur'an does not elaborate a theory of mind as such, but through careful reading, it is possible to understand how the Qur'an conceptualises the moral self. In this view, virtue is a holistic practice involving behaviour towards others, bodily actions, senses, mind, and emotion. Interestingly, modern scholarly theories of emotion also call into question the popular understanding in which there is a definitive split between rationality and feeling. Monique Scheer ('Are Emotions a Kind of Practice?', 2012), outlines a theory of emotions as a practice, and other modern scholars consider emotions within the realm of rational responses.



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