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Cultural Diversity as Logic-and-Meaning Otherness:
the Case of Knowledge and Faith

Whenever we engage in a comparative study of any two cultures, we start with one of them and proceed to another. *An-other* culture is always there whenever we speak about one of the two. It is there because of the *otherness* that distinguishes the two cultures under study. Such otherness always lets us know about itself, and a comparative study is in fact a study of otherness.

In this paper I will speak about a type of otherness that I refer to as *logic-and-meaning otherness*. Both sides, logical and semantic, are involved here. It means that when we speak about a concept of, let us say, 'knowledge' or 'faith', we cannot get to its content without taking into account the logic that builds it up and ties it to other concepts; and we will not grasp the logic of reasoning that involves 'knowledge' and 'faith' without understanding its semantic substance.

It is quite common to speak about semantic otherness that distinguishs phenomena sharing common names in different cultures, such as 'knowledge' or 'faith'. It is not that common to speak about the logic that distinguishes the two cultures as they build up the varying semantic content of such concepts. I argue that in some cases this approach is crucial. Those are cases when the cultures under study are characterised by logic-and-meaning, and not just semantic, otherness.

Such is the case of Western and Muslim cultures. I will speak about the way 'knowledge' and 'faith' are related to each other, bringing to light both logical and semantic aspects as interconnected. Needless to say, it will be a scheme, not more; yet we have to start with this scheme to develop it later into a full-scale picture.

Let me begin with a well-known thing. Islamic thinking does not divide the secular and the ecclesiastical in the way the Western society did. In classical Islamic culture we do not find 'canon' law separated from 'temporal' law, neither 'spiritual' poetry apart from 'profane' poetry, nor 'religious' art separated from 'secular' art, etc.

This does not mean that Islamic culture does not draw distinction between what belongs to the religious sphere and what belongs to the earthly life. On the contrary, such distinction is quite consistent. It is expressed respectively by the notions of *dīn* (literally, "religion") and *dunyā* (literally, "the nearby [world]"). This distinction presupposes as well the separation between the two; and, furthermore, an opposition between them.

Thus both Western and Islamic thinking point to the difference, understood as an opposition, between the two spheres. My question is: how is this opposition, so to say, organised? how is it built up? Further, the opposition presupposes a unifying concept. How is unification achieved in the two cases?

This is the question that I will address.

In the Western case, 'faith' and 'knowledge' make up a contradiction, because 'faith', from the logical point of view, ought to be understood and treated as 'non-knowledge', i.e., as a logical negation of 'knowledge'.

Thus, during the Middle Ages, philosophy acted as a servant of theology, allowed to study what faith did not cover. The Enlightenment reversed the subordination: it placed autonomous reason in a superior position, and limited faith to the areas from which it could not endanger the domination of reason. This logic relating faith and knowledge is more stable than the fluctuating content filling these categories.

Now, if faith is, logically speaking, non-knowledge, how is it possible to 'know by faith'? Or how can belief (which is something closely related to faith and falling under the same category of 'non-knowledge') be a basis for any piece of knowledge, as is the case of any theoretical construction? Those are questions that arise *after* we have built up a logic-and-meaning cluster of the two notions, 'knowledge' and 'non-knowledge', and related them to each other as a dichotomic opposition. Only then we can discover how amazing, and even paradoxical this cluster appears, since faith and belief, which are non-knowledge, could be as well considered knowledge from certain points of view.

However elaborated, those paradoxes do not in the least undermine the validity of the initial build-up. Rather, it is this logic-and-meaning relation of knowledge to non-knowledge that constitutes the ground for all those questions, problems and paradoxes, and without it they would simply cease to be.

Exactly this thing happens as we shift to the domain of Islamic thinking. Here, we see no dichotomy of opposites. This seemingly queer point was already hinted to by what we started with: distinction and opposition of 'religious' (*dīn*) and 'worldly' (*dunyawī*) is there, and yet we see no division of spheres that we would expect to be split into those two halves. This is the logical side of things; I will get back to it in a moment.

The semantic aspect comes to light when we discover that Islamic culture opposes 'knowledge' (*'ilm*) not with 'non-knowledge', but with 'action' (*'amal*). Accordingly, 'faith' or 'belief' simply cannot contradict knowledge, since they do not belong to the category which stands in an opposition to 'knowledge'. This brings us back to the logical side, and this back-to-logic shift of our discussion will help us understand why and how 'action' could be a logically consistent opposition of 'knowledge'.

It happens so because opposites here are not mutually exclusive. Rather they require each other as their condition. I mean this ontologically, not just logically: for an

opposite to be, its counterpart should come into existence as well. (This is clearly not the case for dichotomic opposites.) Moreover, the opposites here, so to say, *convert* into each other. This *conversion* (or, we could say, *transition*) is the reason for their mutual ontological necessitation.

So, knowledge and action in the domain of Islamic culture are opposites, which means, according to the logic-and-meaning rules of this domain, that they presuppose each other and convert into each other. Now we are ready to introduce another concept, that is, the one that ties those opposites together by unifying them.

This unity is produced by the mutual transition of opposites; moreover, we could say that it *is* that transition. Knowledge converts into action (or, one could say, brings action to life); action is determined and produced by knowledge. It is this mutual conversion of knowledge and action that unites them; this unity, which means necessitation of the one by the other, is 'faith' (*īmān*).

Faith eliminates opposition between knowledge and action and serves for them as the general term. The general is constituted by the transition of the 'inferior' oppositions into each other, yet it does not in any sense 'include' them, either in the sense that an idea includes a possibility for its individual embodiments or a synthesising notion includes the synthesised oppositions, or in any other sense.

This exposition serves to explain why, in the domain of Islamic culture, faith cannot contradict knowledge.

Transition of knowledge into action constitutes and establishes (*ithbāt*) faith. The very idea of reason achieving its autonomy by freeing itself from the dominance of faith is not just incorrect (in which case it would be possible to keep looking for other arguments). In Islamic culture, this idea is *meaningless*; according to the common English phrase, it simply *does not make sense* and cannot therefore be discussed. To 'get rid' of the 'supremacy of religious faith' and 'liberate the mind from its domination' would mean to eliminate the unity and coordination of knowledge and action, to disbalance them.[1]

On the other hand, under the logic-and-meaning rules of Islamic cultural domain nearly any piece of knowledge which is harmoniously connected to and leads to action creates faith. (The only *a priori* exception that comes to mind is the direct denial of monotheism as an explicit thesis.)

That is why Islamic theoreticians, past and present, claim, often so enthusiastically, that everything in Islamic culture is 'illuminated by the light of faith' and that any action, including the movements of a potter or carpenter, is 'inseparable from faith'.

This thesis is correct — yet it is correct only if understood within the logic-and-meaning domain of Islamic culture. One should not interpret knowledge – for

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[1] This is what the ideas that suggest 'bringing Islamic countries close to Western standards' boil down to, if treated theoretically.

instance, the carpenter's knowledge that goes into his hand's movements planing wood – as 'included into' faith and consequently — consequently for Western thinking — as 'religious' knowledge which, by the force of the same logic-and-meaning rules, could be opposed to 'non-religious' knowledge, thus producing opposition of faith and knowledge. That would be true from the Western point of view. As long as we remain in the domain of Islamic thinking, knowledge and action as such are 'outside' faith, and therefore cannot contradict faith.[2]

By the force of the same logic-and-meaning imperative, Islamic culture does not impede the development of scientific knowledge.[3] In the writings of the most important Islamic theoreticians, including contemporary ones, one can trace the desire to see the entire sum of science as one of the constitutive elements of faith, which — as an implication — in no way contradicts it.[4]

At the very end of 'Anna Karenina' (Part 8, Chapts. XII-XIII), Leo Tolstoy describes in detail Levin's sudden insight – or, to be precise, his sudden and clear awareness – of what Levin had already known as 'spiritual truths which he had sucked with his mother's milk'. All his life, he had inside a sort of struggle between this prehistoric knowledge-faith and another kind of knowledge achieved by reason and verified by science. These two kinds of knowledge are incompatible because they express incompatible truths. A person can possess both but has to place them at 'different layers' of his or her personality. At the end, one of them wins. These two kinds of knowledge are faith (knowledge-by-faith) and knowledge (procured by reason as the only authority in the matter).

This short piece nearly exhausts the problematic of the faith-to-knowledge relationship. Expressed in a few pages, Tolstoy's thoughts would take volumes if all their implications were to be unfolded. My task, however, is not to attempt such unfolding, successful or unsuccessful, more or less complete. My task is to point out the logic-and-meaning basis of any such unfolding as well as of the ideas still undeveloped in Levin's inner monologue.

Islamic culture, like any other, can be explained as a set of logic-and-meaning clusters organised according to the rules that stay the same within that culture's domain

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[2]   'Knowledge of the nearby world' (*'ilm dunyawī*), however, could contradict 'religious knowledge' (*'ilm dīnī*). Yet, firstly, this happens only in the case of their direct (not implicit) contradiction, and, secondly, it is a conflict inside the domain of knowledge and not between knowledge and faith, which implies quite a different logic both of conflict and of its resolution. For this, Ibn Rushd's 'Faṣl al-maqāl' serves as a good example.

[3]   I do not speak here of well-known cases of extremism and fanaticism, which are exceptions that confirm the rule and which – one should understand it very clearly and use it accordingly – contradict the very logic of Islamic culture in its own right.

[4]   For the last century, M. Iqbal is a bright illustration.

but could differ in other culture. The case of faith and knowledge is only one of many possible examples.

The same logic-and-meaning procedures apply to the 'body-and-soul' cluster. Body and soul, being mutually determined oppositions, constitute the human 'I-ness' (*'anā'iyya*) by virtue of their conversion and transition into each other.[5] The 'I-ness' (*'anā'iyya*) is an absolutely simple entity and does not in any sense 'include' body and soul as its parts. Absolutely indivisible, this entity is something in which both the body and the soul, external to it, come to unity that rules out any opposition between them[6]. Theories of psychophysical parallelism, the discussion of which plagues modern Western philosophy and psychology, simply lack any basis in this logic-and-meaning domain.

To comprehend the logic-and-meaning causation for a culture's identity is a long and painstaking work demanding constant attention to the operation of one's own mind, which is not, of course, free from the logic-and-meaning imperatives of one's mother culture. Yet this comprehension is the only way towards a real dialogue with a culture which stands to our own in relation of logic-and-meaning, and not just semantic, otherness.

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[5] An excellent illustration of this logic-and-meaning procedure is to be found in the book by M.N. al-'Attas "Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam" (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995, pp. 225-227). The author refers to Ibn Sīnā's theories, but this way of reasoning, as he rightly points out, is quite representative for Islamic thinking on the whole.

[6] This point needs some clarification. Body and soul are opposites if taken 'as such'. But when we treat them 'as such', we cannot speak about their unity in any sense. It means we can talk about either 'soul' or 'body' but not about 'human being', since the 'human being' is one, is a unity, and not just body apart from soul. Yet after we achieve such unity and grasp the human 'I-ness', the body and the soul 'as such' cease to be, and we can speak only of the absolutely simple and indivisible 'I-ness' as a unity of body and soul. Logically speaking, this unity transgresses any opposition between the two, and, semantically, it transgresses the semantic domains of the two: the 'I-ness' is devoid of any trace of the 'body' and 'soul' semes 'inside' itself. Logical and semantic are mutually determinant, building up a logic-and-meaning cluster.