

The limitations of human knowledge

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In the chapter entitled Al-Isra (the Night Journey) of the Quran there is a verse which concerns the art of thinking. The translation of this verse is as follows: "They question you about the Spirit. Say, "The Spirit is at my Lord's command, and you have been granted but little knowledge"" (17:85).

This Quranic verse enshrines a very important principle regarding the theory of knowledge: that man was created with certain limitations, due to which he cannot apprehend everything. To accept this limitation is the greatest wisdom, for it opens the door to all possible knowledge.

Philosophy has a long history, but it has failed to provide any clear-cut knowledge about human life. In fact, all the philosophers of the past and present have been purveyors of confusion. On the contrary, scientists have been able to provide us with fruitful knowledge. Indeed, modern civilisation is a gift of the scientific community. Why is there this difference between the two disciplines? The reason is that philosophers have failed to accept human limitations, while scientists have accepted them. Acceptance of limitations opens the door to all kinds of genuine knowledge.

The wise man tries to gain knowledge about the things around him, but he refrains from jumping into those fields where it is impossible to draw conclusions due to a lack of data. To differentiate between the two kinds of disciplines is an important principle of knowledge. If you want to know about the physical world, that is something which is comprehensible with the aid of telescopes and microscopes. But there is a world which is beyond all telescopes and microscopes.

Taking a leap into the realm of these inaccessible phenomena is characterised by the well-known saying: "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."