

Modern Western Philosophical Reasoning and The Sacred: Seyyed Hossein Nasr on The Cogito and the Place of the Intellect, Revelation and Reason in Human Affairs¹

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Abstract: This paper is an analysis of the perspective of Seyyed Hossein Nasr as it concerns the place of the intellect, revelation, reason in human affairs. It also dwells on the cogito of Rene Descartes in modern philosophical reasoning and how it shaped the understanding of reason, intellect and revelation in modern western thought. Using the analytical method, the paper examines his view concerning the use of reason in modern philosophical thought. He decries the idea of holding reason as the only authority in human affairs and knowledge. He condemns the relegation of revelation to dogma and superstition and the interpretation of intellect as reason. He posits that this problem arises because of the misconception about the role and place of reason in human thought. In the light of this, he explains the role of reason, the intellect and revelation and their relationship in the worldview of sacred traditions. He concludes that the modern philosophical reasoning misinterpreted these three concepts as a result of the problem of the cogito and the turning away from the worldview of sacred traditions. The solution to this problem, he says, lies in situating reason in the realm that it is understood in sacred traditions and not making it lord and master over and above the intellect and revelation.
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I. INTRODUCTION

The discussion about the place of reason in human affairs and knowledge acquisition still continues to dominate the human intellectual landscape even in the 21st century. However, the 21st century as in the post-modern period has seen reason been challenged as the only way of knowing and as the final authority in human affairs. The age-old rivalry between modern philosophical reasoning and religion (or sacred traditions as Nasr calls it) has also come to the fore in the contemporary time. This resurgence of sacred traditions in the contemporary time attests to the fact that they have an important role in the scheme of things as it concerns human beings and his existence in this world. In spite of all efforts to relegate sacred traditions to the realm of dogma and superstition, they continue to resonate with people in different ages and periods hence, a need to explore it again, especially against the claim of its ardent adversary (modern western philosophical reasoning).

By modern western philosophical reasoning, we mean the idea of “the exclusive use of reason independent of both intellection and revelation and the consideration of reason as the highest and exclusive authority for the attainment of truth.”² That is, modern philosophical reasoning stands for that position in the west which views all received ideas and beliefs, that do not conform to dialectical and discursive analogical reasoning (as espoused by modern western philosophers since the period of the enlightenment) as dogmas and superstitions which should be discarded in the scheme of human affairs. Sacred traditions, on the other hand, according to Nasr means “truths or principles of a divine origin revealed or unveiled to mankind and, in fact, a whole cosmic sector through various figures envisaged as messengers, prophets, avatars, the Logos or other transmitting agencies, along with all the ramifications and applications of these principles in different realms including law and social structure, art, symbolism, the sciences, and embracing of course Supreme Knowledge along with the means for its attainment.”³ Furthermore, in linking it with religion, Nasr says tradition is “that perennial wisdom which lies at the heart of every religion and which is none other than the Sophia whose possession the sapiential perspective in the West as well as in the Orient has considered as the crowning achievement of human life. This eternal wisdom “which constitutes one of the main components of the concept of tradition is none other than the *sophiaperennis* of the Western tradition, which the Hindus call the *sanatana dharma* and the Muslims *al-hikmat al-khalidah* (or *javidankhirad* in Persian).”⁴ Thus, by sacred traditions, Nasr means all the great religions of the world which came before Islam and ends with Islam as the last of them and the Prophet Muhammad himself as the last medium of the sacred traditions

“the manifestations of the Logos or appearance of plenary revelations such as that of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam or in another context Hinduism, Taoism, and Confucianism came to an end a long time ago in fact with Islam whose prophet is described by the revelation itself as the Last Prophet. Moreover, history has been witness to the fact that nothing comparable to these major revelations has occurred since the advent of Islam.”⁵

However, to better understand the thrust of this article, what is to come below will shed light on modern philosophical reasoning, sacred tradition, and the cogito ergo sum of Rene Descartes as they relate to the intellect, revelation and reason and the perspectives of Seyyed Hossein Nasr on these three concepts.

Modern Western Philosophical Reasoning

Modern western philosophical reasoning takes root in the age of the enlightenment when thinkers in that age or period of time in the western world hold that all beliefs, assumptions, authorities, cultures etc must, as a matter of necessity, be subjected to critical and empirical reasoning. They posit that traditional authorities, institutions or customs must not be accepted on the basis that they have been long-lasting and are therefore true. They see the non-questioning of accepted norms as dogmatic and something which cannot advance man and his society. These thinkers hold that, in the new age of the enlightenment, all received ideas should be examined critically and analytically by holding them up to the standard of reason before they can be accepted as true or rejected as false. True knowledge, they opined cannot be gained by belief or faith alone but rather through thorough empirical and rational test. For them, everything that we know and everything that we can ever know is what we are able to perceive through our senses and interpret with our reason. Therefore, there are no such things as revealed truth or innate ideas.⁶

This position adopted above in the period of the enlightenment became firmly rooted in modern western thought in the time or period referred to as the modern age. At this time, modern philosophical reasoning became the order of the day especially with the formulation of the cogito by Rene Descartes. Rene Descartes in trying to establish the truth of his received ideas and tradition raised the question of knowledge and how human beings know. In questioning the human ability to know, he came to the realization that the idea of taking anything to be true on the basis of faith or authority of others (like clergymen, religious institutions etc.) does not lead to true knowledge. As such, he affirms that all things, including revealed truth, has to pass the test of rigorous human reasoning, otherwise, whatever is proclaimed on the basis of faith/belief alone cannot be said to be true. Thus, as a first step, in order to establish the truth of his own ideas, he posits that he has to start from thinking and only a thing that exists can think. Since he is able to think, he says, he therefore exists and he expressed this in the Latin language as *Cogito Ergo Sum* – I think, therefore, I exist. Since his time, modern philosophical reasoning became the basis for the evaluation of everything and anything that fails to fit into this systemic mode of reasoning became rejected as dogma or superstition. In other words, things such as belief in revelation, God, terrestrial beings etc became rejected in the modern western world as mere superstition. Talking about this shift in modern western thought, Baron d’Holbach, one of the modern thinkers who subscribe to this idea says:

The *enlightened man*, is man in his maturity, in his perfection; who is capable of pursuing his own happiness; because he has learned to examine, to think for himself, and not to take that for truth upon the authority of others, which experience has taught him examination will frequently prove erroneous...⁷

That is to say that, since it is by reason alone know that a thing or an idea or assumption is true or false; nothing can be accepted as revealed truth since this is not empirically verifiable and its claim(s) may not stand the standard test of reason. Thus, in this sense, all religious doctrines and teachings became suspect and the question here is, does religion still stand relevant in the modern age – since some of its claims about God, angels, paradise, hellfire etc are not empirically verifiable and cannot stand the test of modern reasoning?⁸

The answer to the question above is definitely no. Religious beliefs are revealed and since they are revealed, some of them are beyond the realm of reason and therefore cannot be classified as true based on modern philosophical reasoning.⁹ Moreover, many of the thinkers in the enlightenment and modern age, having asserted the supremacy of reason, did not reckon with any revealed religions. Those that still retain some sense of religion are mostly deist – that is, those who believe “in God based on reason rather than revelation”¹⁰ and hold “the view that God has set the universe in motion but does not interfere with how it runs.”¹¹ That is, God, having done his job of creating the universe and setting it in motion, is no longer relevant in its ordering and activities since the universe obeys natural laws which are unalterable.¹² One of them, Thomas Paine, says concerning religions:

I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life.

I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. *My own mind is my own church.*

*All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.*¹³ [Emphases are mine].

The Sacred: Nasr's Perspectives on the Intellect, Revelation, Reason¹⁴

It is against the backdrop of the above that Nasr disagrees with the idea of reason as espoused in modern philosophical thought. For Nasr, he sees reason, the intellect and revelation as playing different roles in the scheme of human affairs and knowledge. Thus, he explained the different roles of the intellect, revelation and reason, their relationship in the attainment of knowledge by human beings and as understood in the Sacred Traditions against its projection in the enlightenment and the modern periods.

For Nasr, reason on its own cannot disclaim the truth of revelation as reason has its own realm of knowledge just as the intellect and revelation have their own realms where they operate. First, Nasr explains the difference between intellect and reason and explicates that these two things should not be confused as meaning the same thing as it is held in modern western thought. According to him, modern thought or knowledge, due to its severance from the sacred, has come to espouse reason over intellect and revelation and has, in fact, reduced intellect itself to reason while defining man as a rational being without taking cognizance of his intelligence as understood and defined in tradition.¹⁵ Nasr says concerning this,

The reduction of the Intellect to reason and the limitation of intelligence to cunning and cleverness in the modern world [have] caused sacred knowledge to become inaccessible and to some even meaningless.¹⁶

In the view of Nasr, there is a need to situate reason, intellect and revelation where they properly belong as explained in the sacred traditions. When this is done, according to him, then we will understand that the knowledge of the sacred and true knowledge of realities as they really are can only be attained through the intellect, since it is the intellect itself that is "the source of both knowledge and being, of the subjective conscience which knows and the objective order which is known."¹⁷ In other words, modern philosophical reasoning lacks what it takes to understand this because of its misconception of what reason is and how it is related to intellect and revelation. This also implies that it is not revelation that is problematic, it is the misuse of reason in a realm that it cannot operate that causes the problem of the misunderstanding of revelation in modern western philosophical thought.

Going further, Nasr explains the relationship among the intellect, revelation and reason saying that the intellect, known in various sacred traditions as "The Logos or *Buddhi* or '*aql*,'"¹⁸ is also the source of revelation. It is the one that creates a link between human being and the cosmos and, also, the meta-cosmic Reality. It is, likewise, the luminous centre which is the generating agent of the world, man, and religion – since 'it was by the Word that all things were made'. Also, Nasr says, it is God's knowledge of Himself and the first in His creation.¹⁹

However, he says, because man is already too far disconnected from his primordial nature, he needs revelation – which alone can actualize the intellect in man and permits it to work properly – to be able to make full use of this divine gift, hence the importance of revelation in the world and its interconnectedness to the intellect.²⁰

Nasr explicates further that revelation actualizes the potentialities of the intellect. It removes the barriers of the carnal soul which prevent the intellect from functioning. Likewise, it makes viable the communication of an initiative knowledge which at the same time resides within the very substance of the intellect.²¹ And most importantly, he says:

there is an unbridgeable hiatus between intelligence sanctified by revelation and the intelligence which, cut off from this source and also from its own root, is reduced to its reflection upon the human mind and atrophied into that truncated and fragmented faculty which is considered scientifically as intelligence.²²

But the intellect, Nasr affirms, is neither the mind nor reason which is a reflection of the intellect upon the human plane. Rather, the intellect, he says, is the root and centre of consciousness and what has been traditionally called the soul.²³ In other words, the seat of intelligence in man is the heart, as affirmed by all traditional teachings, and not the head as held in modernity. The heart, Nasr says, is likewise the centre of the human microcosm and thus the "locus" of the intellect by which all things were made.²⁴

However, Nasr says, the externalization and projection of the intelligence upon the plane of the mind is a necessary condition of human existence because, without it, man would not be man – that is, man would not be that creature who has been created as a thinking being.²⁵ In Nasr's view, dialectical intelligence, which is identified with the human mind, is not in itself negative. In fact, human intelligence in its comprehensiveness entails the correct functioning of both the intelligence of the heart and that of the mind – the first being intuitive and the second analytical and discursive.²⁶ The correct functioning of the two together, Nasr says, make feasible the reception, crystallization, formulation, and finally communication of the truth.²⁷ Explaining this further, he says, the

[m]ental formulation of the intuition received by the intelligence in the heart becomes completely assimilated by man and actualized through the activity of the mind. This, in fact, is one of the main roles of meditation in spiritual exercises, meditation being related to activity of the mind. Through this process also the light received by the heart is communicated and transmitted, such an activity being necessary because of the very nature of the

content of the intuition received by the intelligence residing in the heart, the content which, being good, has to give of itself and, like all goodness, shine forth.²⁸

The human being, Nasr points out, needs to exteriorize certain inner truths in order to be able to interiorize, to analyze in order to synthesize, synthesis needing a phase of analysis. Hence, the need of man for language which proceeds from holy silence and returns again to it, but which plays a vital role in the formulation of the truth issuing from the first silence and in preparing man for return to the second silence which is synthesis after analysis, returns to unity after separation.²⁹

Symbolically, Nasr concludes that the mind can be seen as the moon which mirrors the light of the sun which is the heart. That is, the intelligence in the heart shines upon the plane of the mind which then mirrors this light upon the dark night of the terrestrial existence of fallen man.³⁰ Therefore, *Scientiasacra* which, Nasr says, issues from the total intelligence of the heart, also include the dialectic of the mind.³¹

However, it needed to be said that, the relationship among these concepts – that is, intellect, soul, heart and mind, in the traditional sense that Nasr uses them – is that the intellect is the root and centre of consciousness and it is also known as the soul in tradition and it resides in the heart of man. It is through it (intellect) that man gains intuitive knowledge. But, the mind, which is the centre of reason and which is concerned with reasoning, helps man to project this intuitive knowledge, gained by the intellect, on to the human plane in a discursive and analytical form that is understandable to the majority of the people.³²

Thus, from all the discussions above, it is clear that, in tradition, man acknowledges the power of reason to know, but this reason was always connected to and derived its sustenance from revelation on the one hand, and intellectual intuition on the other hand.³³

However, in contrast to the above, modern philosophical reason reduces the intellect to reason alone and holds it to be the mind and not the heart as in tradition. Based on this, it also discarded revelation as dogmatic since it cannot meet the criteria of reason as understood in the modern age. In other words, intuitive knowledge and revelation being non-analytical and discursive or not conforming to the scientific mode of knowing, which is prevalent in modern philosophical thought, were denied and the consequence is that all knowledge became rational knowledge which inevitably results in rationalism – which is understood as “the exclusive use of reason independent of both intellection and revelation and the consideration of reason as the highest and exclusive authority for the attainment of truth.”³⁴

The Cogito as the Problem of Modern Western Philosophical Reasoning³⁵

Rationalism started in earnest with the early philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. While Plato still retains the idea of God and other, non-temporal, beings as a result of his idea of the Form, Aristotle who is the father of peripatetic philosophy disagree with Plato on the idea of the Form. Aristotle held that everything is temporal and subject to reason and empirical verification because another world could not possibly be conceived to exist apart from this world which would contain the Form as Plato posits. Based on this stand, Aristotle reduced what can be known to this empirical world and reason as the interpreter of this knowledge.³⁶ This submission of Aristotle gained current and developed rapidly right from the Renaissance in the modern western world and it reached its zenith with Descartes,³⁷ whom, Nasr says, in seeking a new foundation for knowledge appealed neither to revelation nor to the intellect (as it works in the heart of man where it is situated and as the source of reason), but to the individual consciousness of the thinking subject when he said *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore, I exist).³⁸

According to Nasr, had the famous *cogito* of Descartes “referred to the primacy of the subject over the object in the sense that the Vedantists consider *Atman* to be the primary reality compared to which all externalized existence and objectivization is *maya*,”³⁹ Western modern thought could have taken a direction which is in line with tradition because the *cogito ergo sum*, in reality, also contain a profound metaphysical significance if understood in the Vedantic sense.⁴⁰ But as it turns out, Descartes, Nasr says, in saying that “I think, therefore I am,” was not referring to the Divine I or the Divine Self which alone *can* say I and whom, some seven centuries before Descartes, Mansur al-Hallaj had referred to when he said “I am the Truth” (*ana’ l-Haqq*).⁴¹ Rather, he says, Descartes in saying I was referring to his individual self, and, from the gnostic point of view, it was Descartes’ illusory self that was placing its experience and consciousness of thinking as the foundation of epistemology and ontology and the source of certitude. In this circumstances, even *being* was also subordinated to it and considered a consequence of it, hence the *ergo*.⁴²

According to Nasr, even if Descartes begins with the act of thinking, he could have concluded with *est* rather than *sum*, asserting that his thinking and consciousness are themselves proofs that God is, not that him or “I” as an individual am or is.⁴³ But, Descartes, having taken a different route from tradition, made the thinking of the individual ego the locus of reality and measure of all forms of knowledge, thereby, turning philosophy into pure rationalism and changing the main concern of European philosophy from ontology to epistemology. Henceforth, knowledge became rooted in the cogito. That is, the knowing subject was now bound

to the realm of reason and separated from intellect and revelation – neither of which was, hereafter, considered as potential sources of knowledge of an objective order.⁴⁴

The consequence of this, says Nasr, is that, knowing, thus, becomes depleted of its sacred content to the point that anything that shares of reality can become divorced from the sacred. And, worst still, to the mentality of those who have been caught in the web of this newly established rationalism, knowledge and science were, henceforth, seen as being totally separated from the sacred – even if the sacred were to be accepted as possessing a reality.⁴⁵ Nasr says:

To this mentality the very concept of a *scientiasacra* appeared as a contradiction in terms and, in fact, it still appears as either contradictory or meaningless not only to those who either consciously or unconsciously follow the rationalism inherent in Cartesian epistemology but also to those who have rebelled against this rationalism from below with the kinds of irrationalism which characterize so much of modern thought.⁴⁶

Moreover, Nasr says, even if such a mentality were to seek for the Sacred, it cannot attain to it because of its severance from the source of what it is seeking for.

The attempt of the rational mind to discover the Intellect through its own light is seen by tradition to be futile because the object which the rational faculty is trying to perceive is actually the subject which makes the very act of perception by the rational faculty possible. A mind which is cut off from the light of the intelligence of the heart and which seeks to find God is unaware that the light with which it is seeking to discover God is itself a ray of the Light of God. Such a mind cannot but be like a person wandering in the desert in the brightness of day with a lamp in his hand looking for the sun. Blindness does not issue from reason but from reason being cut off from the intellect and then trying to play the role of the intellect in the attainment of knowledge.⁴⁷

II. CONCLUSION

For Nasr, therefore, situating reason in its proper realm as understood in the sacred traditions and the wedding of reason back to revelation and intellectual intuition not as their lord but as partners in progress in the attainment of knowledge by human beings is a task which must first be accomplished in modern philosophical thought before one can properly appreciate the role of the intellect and revelation in human affairs. In other words, for Nasr, reason cannot in anyway be held to be superior to revelation and intellect as they operate in different realms while complementing one another.

Endnotes

¹This idea was modified from some of the writings in the book *Islam and Modernity: Dissecting the Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr: A Discourse on the Compatibility or Incompatibility of Islam with Modernity* by Musa Y. Owoyemi and published by Lap Lambert Publishers, Germany. A version of it was first presented at SIDKUN conference at University Utara Malaysia before this final version was prepared for publication.

²Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the order of nature*, 170. Also See Musa Yusuf Owoyemi, *Islam and Modernity: Dissecting the Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*.

³Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *knowledge and the sacred*, The Gifford Lectures 1981, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989.) 68. Also See Musa Yusuf Owoyemi, *Islam and Modernity: Dissecting the Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*.

⁴Ibid., 68.

⁵Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Reply to Sallie B. King", in *The philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, edited by Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier and Lucian W. Stone, JR, (Illinois: Open Court, 2001), 223.

⁶Richard E. Sullivan & et al., *A short history of western civilization*, 467. Also See Musa Yusuf Owoyemi, *Islam and Modernity: Dissecting the Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*.

⁷ Dennis Sherman, *Western civilization: sources, images and interpretation*, 136. Also See Musa Yusuf Owoyemi, *Islam and Modernity: Dissecting the Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*.

⁸See Musa Yusuf Owoyemi, *Islam and Modernity: Dissecting the Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*.

⁹Musa Yusuf Owoyemi, *Islam and Modernity: Dissecting the Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*.

¹⁰ See Maryanne Cline Horowitz, ed., *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, vol. 2, 547 – 550. The above is quoted from, *Encarta Dictionary Microsoft Encarta2006 [DVD]*, (Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2005).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹²Musa Yusuf Owoyemi, *Islam and Modernity: Dissecting the Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*.

¹³ Dennis Sherman, 142 – 143.

¹⁴ For further reading on this, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr's, *Sufi essay*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2nd edn., 1991), 52 – 56; *Ideals and realities of Islam*, (London: The Aquarian Press), 136.

¹⁵ According to Nasr, "rather than defining [man] only as a 'rational animal,' one can define man in a more principal manner as a being endowed with a total intelligence centered upon the Absolute and created to know the Absolute. To be human is to know and also to transcend oneself." Quoted from *Knowledge and the sacred*, 4. Also See Musa Yusuf Owoyemi, *Islam and Modernity: Dissecting the Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*.

¹⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the sacred*, 4.

¹⁷ Ibid., 147.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. Also See Musa Yusuf Owoyemi, *Islam and Modernity: Dissecting the Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*.

²⁰ Ibid., 148.

²¹ Ibid., 149.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. 147.

²⁴ Ibid., 150.

²⁵ Ibid., 151.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See Musa Yusuf Owoyemi, *Islam and Modernity: Dissecting the Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*.

³¹ Ibid., 151 – 152.

³² Ibid., 147 – 152.

³³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the modern world*, 102.

³⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the order of nature*, 170.

³⁵ See Musa Yusuf Owoyemi, *Islam and Modernity: Dissecting the Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*.

³⁶ See Samuel Enoch Stumpf & James Fieser, *Philosophy: History and Readings*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 8th edn., 2012)

³⁷ Also see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi essay*, 53.

³⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the sacred*, 41.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid. Also See Musa Yusuf Owoyemi, *Islam and Modernity: Dissecting the Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 41 – 42.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 42. Also See Musa Yusuf Owoyemi, *Islam and Modernity: Dissecting the Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 152.

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