

## **Was there *'Aql* before Adam? On Rationality and Adamic Exceptionalism**

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### **Abstract**

Many Islamic positions have emerged in response to the theory of evolution. One particular response is the Adamic exceptionalism, which asserts that although Adam is exempt from the process of evolution, there were still other “humans” existing before or contemporaneous to him who were natural products of evolution. The argument for the humanness of the pre-Adamic human-like creatures is hinged on the supposed shared rationality between them. On this position, Shoaib Malik is of the opinion that it is the most reconciliatory solution for Sunnī theology and scientific findings. Hence, this article aims to conduct a paradigmatic comparison between the concept of rationality in anthropology and the concept of *'aql* in the worldview of Islam with special reference to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. Based on his articulation of the conception of man within the worldview of Islam, anthropology’s

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“rationality” can be said to amount to only some fractions of what is known as the practical reason in Islam. This study concludes that all human-like creatures prior to Adam are not proper humans as defined in the name *insān*.

### Keywords

*Aql*, Adam, rationality, *homo sapiens*, *insān*, humanness, reason, *intellectus*, *ratio*.

### Introduction

The theory of evolution has been the subject of inter and intrareligious debates for centuries. From these debates, various positions have emerged. One particular position is Adamic exceptionalism. Shoaib Malik explains:

Adamic exceptionalism is the idea that non-humans and humans are a product of evolution, but only Adam is an exception to that process (which then entails that Adam is not considered to be the first human).<sup>1</sup>

This position states that although Adam was created anew and not subject to the process of evolution, there were still humans that had existed before or/and contemporaneous to him. Adam belonged to the *homo sapiens*, which is a species (*sapiens*) of a genus (*homo*) which includes many other *homos*—*homo erectus*, *homo habilis*, the Neanderthals, and others. Based on this categorisation, then, all of the *homos* are considered to be humans. Regarding the theological acceptability of Adamic exceptionalism, Shoaib Malik remarks that “in light of evolution, Adamic exceptionalism seems to be the closest alignment one can get with al-Ghazālī’s

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1. He refers to the canons of interpretation (*qānūn al-ta’wīl*) as espoused by al-Ghazālī in his various works. See Shoaib Malik, *Islam and Evolution: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm* (Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 112.

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framework.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, according to the thesis, the position that Adam was not the first human as traditionally accepted is religiously acceptable.

Scientifically, recent archaeological findings did nothing but to further substantiate the possibility of other humans existing before or contemporaneous to Adam. Anthropologists found that these “pre-Adamic” humans also conducted activities that are similar to modern humans such as agriculture (of very minimal scales, to be sure), arts, and even religion.<sup>3</sup> These findings of their behaviour—along with their distinctive cognitive anatomy—imply that pre-Adamic humans, very much like us, also possessed reason and rationality.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, based on this conception of rationality, along with the assumption that human’s distinctive feature is indeed rationality, the conclusion therefore is that Adam and the other *homos* are equally humans.

Contrary to this position, al-Attas asserts that only Adam and his descendants are properly human or man, who are bestowed with the designation *insān*.<sup>5</sup> Following the well-established classical definition of man in the Islamic intellectual tradition, he defines man as rational being (*al-hayawān al-nātiq*).<sup>6</sup> On the surface, it is as if Islam and modern anthropology agree with one another in defining man—with rationality as his defining feature. However, a closer look would disclose to us that the concepts of rationality as contained in the concept of *homo sapiens* and *insān* cannot be further apart.

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2. Ibid., 329.

3. Richard G. Klein and Blake Edgar, *The Dawn of Human Culture* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 92; Graeme Barker and Candice Goucher, “A World with Agriculture,” in *The Cambridge World History: A World with Agriculture, 12,000 BCE to 500 BCE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1–25; and Jean Clottes, *What Is Paleolithic Art? Cave Paintings and the Dawn of Creativity* vol. 2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

4. Ian Tattersall, “The Origins of Human Cognition and the Evolution of Rationality,” in *The Evolution of Rationality: Interdisciplinary Essays in Honor of J. Wentzel van Huyssteen* (Cambridge: Wm. Eerdmans., 2006), 167–196.

5. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *On Justice and the Nature of Man* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2015), 33.

6. Ibid., 31.

This paper, therefore, intends to discuss the concept of rationality according to anthropology and the concept of *‘aql* in Islam. Then, the following answers will be addressed: was there *‘aql* before Adam? Can *‘aql* be really considered a defining feature of the previous *homos*?

## **The Anthropological Conception of Rationality**

### *The Origin of Rationality in Anthropology*

Ian Tattersall, emeritus curator with the American Museum of Natural History, synonymises rationality with the ability of language, that is, the ability to use symbols in communicating meanings.<sup>7</sup> In many of his works, he traces the origin of human rationality based on findings made by paleoanthropologists around the world.

According to him, human rationality began with the early hominids who thrived six to seven million years ago. Many of their traits resemble those of modern apes—from their biological stature to their behaviours. However, one trait stood differently in that their manner of locomotion was bipedal. In other words, they walked on two feet. From the anatomical structure of their skulls, anthropologists do not think that their cognitive capacity went

...beyond the level of cognition typical to modern apes. And as intuitively gifted as the apes are, there is little in their behavior to suggest that it is underwritten by elements of the ratiocinative process that underpins modern human thought.<sup>8</sup>

Then, some five million years later (2.5 million years ago) came the *homo habilis* or the “handy man.” They were the first toolmakers. The bipedality that developed earlier allowed their hands to be mostly free, and the phenomenon of *exaptation*

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7. Tattersall, “The Origins of Human Cognition,” 168.

8. *Ibid.*, 170.

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occurred.<sup>9</sup> It is where an organ that originally developed for a different purpose has now been utilised for other purposes not originally intended for it—an innovation, so to speak.<sup>10</sup> In this case, the hands which previously functioned as “legs” can now be used as “hands” for toolmaking.

To be clear, even the early hominids were able to use tools. But they merely used objects as tools. The *homo habilis*, on the other hand, were able to *invent* tools. This ability, according to Tattersall, was made possible by the emergence of insight and foresight. The former is the ability to understand the mechanisms of tools—how they are used and what attributes of the tools that fulfil their utility. The latter is the ability to anticipate the use of the tools in future occasions that have yet to happen, instanced by the habit of the *homo habilis* to carry the invented “tools” across distances, indicating expectation of future uses.<sup>11</sup>

Almost two more million years later (550,000 years ago), the *homo heidelbergensis* thrived. They were finer toolmakers, whose techniques of toolmaking did not only betray insight and foresight, but also primitive imagination. In making their tools, instead of hitting a stone to make it merely sharper, they knew how to shape the nucleus of a stone carefully “with multiple strikes, in such a way that a single final blow would detach a large flake that was in essence a finished implement.”<sup>12</sup> The instruments that they invented followed “mental-templates” instead of only being shaped in such a way as to benefit from its attributes.<sup>13</sup> They made it sharper and according to the shape that they wanted.

Furthermore, they also knew how to choose materials for certain tools—for example, a hammer created from softer materials such as bones—to permit “finer modulations of the

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9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 180.

11. Ibid., 170.

12. Ibid., 173.

13. Idem, *The Origin of the Human Capacity* (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1998), 16.

applied force.”<sup>14</sup> Anthropologists also found shelter sites and weapons such as wooden spears used for hunting, all of which indicate that their behaviours were invigorated by conscious deliberation.<sup>15</sup>

The most recent *homo* before the *homo sapiens* appeared almost 100,000 years later (430,000 years ago). They were the *homo neanderthalensis* or the Neanderthals. They were the first to portray complex communal consciousness. Some behaviours that are indicative of this include interring the dead and long-term care of the sickly and the handicapped members of their groups.<sup>16</sup> Aside from that, anthropologists also call them “expert craftsmen of the stone” for their more advanced skills in making tools. Yet, the objects that they made did not have any properties that might indicate symbolic significance. Instead, everything was still made for utilitarian purposes.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the first *homo sapiens* appeared after 100,000 more years (300,000 years ago) while living as contemporaries to the Neanderthals. However, it was not until 40,000 years ago that the *homo sapiens* distinguished themselves qualitatively from the Neanderthals.<sup>18</sup> This distinction came about with the Cro-Magnons, one of the earliest *homo sapiens*. Remarkably, the achievements of the Cro-Magnons were closely similar to our own. Even 30,000 years ago, they

...had begun to leave extraordinary arts on the walls of caves. Bone flutes of complex sound capability announce the advent of music. Markings on bone plaques clearly represent systems of notations, perhaps even lunar calendars. Some of the most beautifully observed and crafted sculptures ever made date from this time. Technology became more

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14. Idem, “The Origins of Human Cognition,” 173.

15. Ibid., 174.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 176.

18. Ibid.

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complex; by 26 kyr (i.e., 26,000 years ago) bone needles announce the invention of tailoring, and at this time ceramic was devised, figurines being baked in simple but remarkably effective kilns. Hunting became more complex, and fish and bird bones show up for the first time in food refuse.<sup>19</sup>

To summarise, the evolution that brought out mankind began with bipedality. The resultant freer hands allowed for the activity of toolmaking. It then opened the way to access to new source of food which provided greater amount of more complex protein, hence enabling greater physical growth and biological complexification. This led to the formation of brains capable of higher and more abstract information processing as well as “vocal tract capable of producing the sounds associated with articulate speech.”<sup>20</sup> The accidental combination of conducive conditions—the complexifications of physical stature, cognition, technology, and the newly emerged ability of symbolic communication—then gave birth to a rational being capable of culture. Thus is then how the human species as known today was born.<sup>21</sup>

In Tattersall’s account of the anthropological origin of rationality, two points are worthy of attention. Firstly, in the gradual rise of rationality, the principle underlying it is *exaptation*. Tattersall explains it thus:

The evidence...thus points us yet again to a phenomenon that we have been able to track virtually throughout the hominid prehistoric record: behavioral and physical innovation do not proceed hand-in-hand. Clearly, modern symbolic cognition was not possessed (or at least was not expressed) by the earliest anatomically modern *Homo sapiens*. Instead, what seems to have been acquired with the biological reorganization that gave rise to

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19. Idem, *The Origin of the Human Capacity*, 22–23.

20. Ibid., 15.

21. Ibid., 25.

the anatomically distinctive *Homo sapiens* was a *potential*—a potential that had to be discovered by its possessor before it could be exploited... Although the notions of structure and function would on the face of it seem to be inextricably intertwined, in biology structure has to precede function, if only because without structure there can be no function.<sup>22</sup>

Absent from this principle of *exaptation* is teleology—that the functions in which the possessor of the organ uses it outside of its original purposes are not inherent in the organ itself. Feathers are not meant for flying. Rather, it just so happens that birds are able to adapt the biological features accidentally evolved in them to flying. Similarly, the organs responsible for human cognition (the brain) and its articulation (all the organs of speech) did not evolve entirely for rational purposes. Instead, larger brains and articulate speech organs just happened to evolve in humans, and they adapt the organs to uses that reflect rationality.

Of course, this absence of teleology is an operative assumption for modern biology and its related theories. However, in the worldview of Islam, function and purpose precede form and structure. It is only from this vantage point that the notion “the best of form” (*aḥsan taqwīm*)<sup>23</sup> can be comprehended. Since *insān* is made with the best of form for a predetermined purpose, therefore, nothing that is created without said purpose (or any purpose for that matter) can be called proper *insān*. In Islam, even rationality is vested with a higher spiritual purpose as shall be discussed in the next part.

And this brings us to the second noteworthy point. In the absence of teleology, evolution does not unfold in a linear direction towards perfection. Therefore, Tattersall (and of course anthropologists in general) does not see humans as the summit of evolution or the perfection of creation.<sup>24</sup> Instead, we are all

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22. Idem, “The Origins of Human Cognition,” 180.

23. *Sūrat al-Tīn* (95): 4.

24. Tattersall, *The Origin of the Human Capacity*, 25.



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but an experiment that is still unravelling itself. Thus, similar to the first point, a being that is not created as the most perfect creation cannot be called *insān*. In Islam, rationality is what constitutes the perfection of man. Therefore, the *homos* of the anthropologists are not proper humans.

*The Anthropological Origin of Spirituality and Religion*

Relevant to reason in the anthropological picture of human is religion and spirituality, since both are examples of primitive use of reason, and since in the worldview of Islam religion is anything but accidental. In his description of spirituality and religion in the Palaeolithic times, the eminent prehistorian Jean Clottes<sup>25</sup> explains spirituality as:

...an awakening of a consciousness that goes beyond day-to-day life contingencies, beyond “simple” adaptation to material necessities in order to get food, to reproduce, and to survive. Humans then began to question the world around them, and in it they tried to find a reality different from the one perceived through their senses, the one to which—like other animals—they always reacted instinctively.<sup>26</sup>

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25. The hypothesis according to which the Palaeolithic people had a shamanic type of religion and created their art within the framework of those beliefs, was proposed at the beginning of the 1950s by Mircea Eliade, a historian of religion. It was then revived, without any great success, by various researchers during the second half of the 20th century. But eventually, it was considerably developed and reinforced by numerous studies published by David Lewis-Williams over the course of almost a quarter century. Since 1995, often in association with Lewis-Williams, Jean Clottes has endeavoured to reconcile the hypothesis of shamanic religiosity of the prehistoric humans—first introduced by Eliade—with the realities of the subterranean world and its exploitation by the Paleolithic people. See Clottes, *What Is Paleolithic Art?*, 15.
26. Idem, “Spirituality and Religion in the Paleolithic Times,” in *The Evolution of Rationality: Interdisciplinary Essays in Honor of J. Wentzel van Huyssteen* (Cambridge: Wm. Eerdmans., 2006), 133; and *What Is Paleolithic Art?*, 27–28.

From this perspective, religion is then viewed as an attempt at organising spirituality. In any case, the underlying motivation that led humans to do so is survival. Clottes continues:

As a consequence, humans could evolve complex rules of behavior in order to avoid catastrophes, to facilitate everyday life, to obtain the help of the mysterious supernatural powers or to help them maintain the world's indispensable harmony...but with the same purposes, that is, solving the problems linked to their survival.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike Tattersall, Clottes seeks to explain the origin of spirituality and religion not from chronological dating of artifacts and tools that can be attributed to immediate practical purposes. Instead, he enacts a “psychoanalysis” based on three domains: (1) the activity of burials, much of which is suggestive of eschatological beliefs; (2) art, which indicates an imagination of a different (perhaps, even transcendent) reality; and (3) “complex actions not immediately attributable to practical concerns.”<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, this psychoanalysis is possible based on the assumption that humans are able to dream—very much like some mammals such as cats and dogs—and to remember it.<sup>29</sup> This simple idea results in three consequences: (1) the realisation that the mind is different from the body, since the body lies dormant when dreams occur; (2) the second is a curiosity that arises from survival instincts: “how can one benefit from this different reality (if any)?”; and (3) an extension to the previous curiosity: “can the different reality affect changes in our present reality?”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, according to Clottes, the basis of religion is dream. He does not, however, explain the nature of dream itself. Being an anthropologist, whose worldview is of course

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27. Idem, “Spirituality and Religion in the Paleolithic Times,” 133.

28. Ibid., 135.

29. Ibid., 134.

30. Ibid.

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modern biology, the explanation on dream is most probably strictly neurological and cerebral.

Returning to the three domains of analysis as discussed above, ancient humans exhibited peculiar behaviours in their burials of the dead. They did not only bury, but also deposited various goods in the graves with the dead. Anthropologists hypothesise that such behaviours suggest the belief in an afterlife, essentially a different reality altogether. And the goods were meant to ease the journey in the afterlife.<sup>31</sup> In art, the creative act of recreating another reality in various visual forms testifies to the artist's conceptualisation of not only what reality *is*, but also what it *might be* or *could have been*. Underlying this conceptualisation, Clottes argues, is perhaps an indication to the existence of spirituality.<sup>32</sup>

Among the ancient humans such as the Neanderthals (but not the earlier *homos* and the hominids), elaborately decorated graves were discovered in Africa, India, and Europe. All the extensive and toil-filled efforts mustered by the ancient humans defy necessity. In other words, they did not have to do what they did just to bury the dead which is a surprise. This suggests that they were driven by a strong sense of spirituality or beliefs of eschatological kinds.<sup>33</sup> Moving to the modern humans, beginning with the Cro-Magnons, spirituality is already an established phenomenon which was 40,000 years ago. Since the phenomenon of spirituality is no longer an issue, the focus of the anthropologists, therefore, shifts towards its "nature, modalities, chronology, and evolution."<sup>34</sup>

The earliest voluntary burials were found in Qafzeh in Palestine.<sup>35</sup> The oldest symbolic object that is attributable to modern humans was discovered in Blombos Cave, near the Cape

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31. *Ibid.*, 135.

32. *Ibid.*, 136.

33. *Ibid.*, 139.

34. *Ibid.*, 140.

35. *Ibid.*

in South Africa—a polished and worked piece of hematite with complex engravings.<sup>36</sup> These two domains—burials and art—became the major platforms for the Cro-Magnons to express spirituality. In many of these arts, one of the most fascinating main themes recurring is that of “composite creatures”—humans sporting a lion head, humans with the head and wings of birds, and humans with a bison head, to cite a few examples.<sup>37</sup>

Another peculiar characteristic is superimpositions that can be found across the samples. This suggests more than one participant, which in turn implies that the activities in which they participated might have been rituals or ceremonies. Moreover, the fact that the same belief was held by many members of the same group implies that the beliefs were perpetuated (whether through instructions or merely imitations or any other means) among the members of the same groups, across generations, and perhaps even both.<sup>38</sup>

Besides that, all sorts of evidence were discovered which suggest that the Cro-Magnons even attempted to establish connections with the other worlds. The paintings and the rituals were thought to serve as invitations to conjure spirits from their own world into the natural world, for various sorts of reasons. From all their observations, the anthropologists suggest that the mode of spirituality and religions of the Cro-Magnons was shamanic. Clottes even goes as far as to suggest that all world religions<sup>39</sup> are essentially shamanic in disguise in various degrees of complexity.<sup>40</sup> Thus, this is how the anthropologists imagine their *homo spiritualis*.<sup>41</sup>

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36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., 142.

38. Ibid., 145.

39. Clottes does not mention Islam in his extensive list of world religions, although his silence is fairly just as indicative by his treatment of his analysis as a general rule. In other words, Islam is just as fundamentally shamanic as other religions. See Clottes, *What Is Paleolithic Art?*, 91.

40. Ibid., 92.

41. Ibid., 32.

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From the above discussion, one can summarise how anthropology imagines the origin of spirituality and religion. It begins, obviously, with the biological assumption of humanity—that man is primarily, if not strictly, biological and that other more “transcendent” phenomena are extensions of biological sophistication. In this case, the consciousness of spirituality and religion was “awakened” after the brain has developed to a degree of complexity, rather than it being inherent in the form of man. This consciousness, in reality, is a combination of dream and its recollection and organisation which lead to the formation of religion. Religion is none other than a sophisticated expression of the survival instinct. The most immediate form of religious expression of survival instinct is shamanism. Hence, since all religions are founded upon such an immediate expression, all religions in one way or another are shamanic (and, therefore, primitive).

A point worthy of note here is the absence of a spiritual organ responsible for spiritual cognition. Instead, for the anthropologists, religion is but a rational organisation of spirituality, which is in turn nothing but a recollection of dreams. Dreams are only made possible with a more grown and evolved brain. In this conception, religion, too, is a product of evolution.

### **Anthropological Definition of Human**

Today, the consensual designation for human is *homo sapiens*. It was first coined by the supposed father of taxonomy, Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778). Although not himself an evolutionist, Linnaeus categorised human in the category of *homo* which includes other apes that are contemporaneous to us.<sup>42</sup> The categorisation was made based on the morphological and physiological similarities between humans and apes, but humans were vested with the

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42. Carl Linnaeus, *Systema Naturae: The System of Nature*, 10th edition (Frankfurt: The German Society of Zoological Curators, 1785), 20, <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/80764#page/30/mode/1up>.

species *sapiens* in the genus *homo* (literally, “the wise man”) simply due to difference in brain size and the ability of articulate speech (an ability ascribed not to a soul, but to the size of its brain). As for the term *homo*, it refers to a type of creature with the following criteria: “bipedal,” “primate,” and “mammal.”<sup>43</sup>

Later, after Charles Darwin (1809–1882) introduced the theory of evolution, and the science of palaeoanthropology was founded with the discovery of the Neanderthals in 1856 (which made and still makes use of evolution as its operational assumption), it sparked the consideration that there might be other “predecessors” of modern humans.<sup>44</sup> Hence, began the project to speculate on the origin of man.

The definitional framework provided by Linnaeus, the introduction of evolutionism, and the birth of palaeoanthropology, hence, were the factors leading to the definition and conceptualisation of human being in anthropology. Clearly, the designation *homo sapiens* preceded anthropology and palaeoanthropology. This fact shows that both anthropology and palaeoanthropology are ideologically tuned by the materialism that was already plaguing the natural sciences at the time, and that its method—known as “comparative archaeology”—is nothing but a method of bias confirmation and can hardly be called objective.

### **‘Aql in the Worldview of Islam**

#### *‘Aql as Intellect, not Reason*

In the worldview of Islam, an equivalent to the concept of reason and rationality is ‘*aql*. To understand ‘*aql*, we cannot pivot our understanding of it around on the word “rationality,” for

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43. Thomas Barfield (ed.), *The Dictionary of Anthropology* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 39.

44. Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theories* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, Inc., 1968), 8.

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within the latter is contained a very narrow conceptualisation of what the human intellect is capable of. Some other words that warrant caution are “mind” and “reason.” To oversimplify, “rationality,” “mind,” and “reason” are the resultant concepts of a long process of secularisation in the West.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, to understand a reality that belongs to the Islamic tradition requires us to stand outside of the Western mould and reframe our perspective according to that of Islam. In translating *ʿaql*, the term of choice is “intellect,” not “reason.”<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, intellect understood as *ʿaql* comprehends the cognitive operations found in both intellect and reason. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas explains thus:

As regards ‘sound reason’, we mean to understand reason not simply in the sense restricted to sensational elements; to that mental faculty that systematizes and interprets the facts of sensible experience in logical order, or that renders intelligible and manageable to the understanding the data of sensible experience, or that performs the abstraction of facts and sensible data and their relationships, and orders them in a law-giving operation that renders the world of nature understandable.<sup>47</sup>

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45. Al-Attas, *On Justice*, 24–30.

46. Both intellect and reason are English renditions of its original Latin terms—*intellectus* and *ratio*, respectively. *Ratio* is discursive reason, “reasoning” in the prevailing sense, thinking logically from premises to conclusions. *Intellectus*, on the other hand, means understanding, perception of the meaning of abstract concepts, intentionality, and knowledge of truth. This distinction between *intellectus* and *ratio* was originally made by the Medieval Christian theologians such as Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). However, as secularisation progressed, modern Western philosophers have side-lined *intellectus* and only adopted *ratio* as the only mode of operation of thinking.

47. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995), 119.

After summarising what he understands as the contents of reason or ratio according to the West, he then continues:

Indeed, to be sure, reason is all of this, but we maintain further that it is one of the aspects of intellect and functions in conformity with it, not in opposition to it; and the intellect is a spiritual substance inherent in that spiritual organ of cognition we call the heart, which is the seat of intuition. In this way and through the mediacy of the intellect we have connected reason and intuition.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, another ability with which anthropology distinguishes human from the other primates is the capacity of language. While anthropology describes this ability merely as the ability to manipulate and communicate symbols, al-Attas again associates speech with the external manifestation of the internal activities of *‘aql*.<sup>49</sup> In this context, one can derive three of the most basic modes of cognition of *‘aql*. These are “discursive thinking,” which extends to “intellection” (*ta‘aqqul*),<sup>50</sup> and finally “intuition” (*kashf*, *wijdān*, and *dhawq*).<sup>51</sup> Operationally, therefore, a being cannot be considered to be human if it cannot perform all the three: discursive thinking, intellection, and intuition—even, at least, *in potentia*.

Now, the first thing to note *‘aql* is that it is a substance. To be exact, it is a subtle spiritual substance (*jawhar rūḥānī latīf*).<sup>52</sup> This is unlike the reason as conceived in anthropology which views it merely as a process. In other words, its ontological mode

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48. Ibid.

49. Idem, *On Justice*, 31.

50. Which is the process of grasping the “quiddity” of things. See Idem, *Prolegomena*, 229–231.

51. Which is the “direct and immediate apprehension, by the knowing subject, of itself, of its conscious states, of other selves like itself, of an external world, of universals, of values or of rational truths” and also “of religious truths, of reality and existence of God, of the reality of existences as opposed to essences.” See Ibid., 119.

52. Ibid., 163.



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is that of accidents (*ʿaraḍ*), while al-Attas unambiguously states it as a substance (*jawhar*).

And it is connected to the other operational aspects of itself. Therefore, the same spiritual substance is simultaneously known by other names—*rūh*, *qalb*, *nafs*, and, of course, *ʿaql*.<sup>53</sup> For this reason, its operations are not limited only to discursive thinking, but are connected organically to other modes of spiritual cognition.<sup>54</sup> This is why “the understanding of spiritual realities is also within the province of reason and is not necessarily divorced from rational understanding of them.”<sup>55</sup>

In his schema of the soul, al-Attas divides the human soul into two aspects of operation: the practical and the theoretical reasons.<sup>56</sup> The latter is responsible for activities such as the “perception of the real nature of intelligibles abstracted from matter, space, and position”<sup>57</sup> and is also “related to higher form of intellect and principles of higher order of existence.”<sup>58</sup>

This connection to the higher order of existence can be explained by the traversing of the human intellect through four degrees of excellence: the potential material, the possible, the possessive, and the acquired intellects.<sup>59</sup> The potential material intellect is the intellect itself, not yet containing intelligible forms. When intelligible forms are imprinted on it, it transforms into the possible intellect—named so due to it still being dormant, yet already containing the intelligible forms needed for its operations. Then, when it begins to manipulate the forms, it transforms into the possessive intellect, since it now possesses its contents. Finally, when it awakens to self-consciousness, that is, “when it thinks, and thinks the thought it is thinking,” it has reached the stage of the acquired intellect.<sup>60</sup>

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53. Idem, *On Justice*, 32.

54. Ibid., 33.

55. Idem, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995), 35.

56. Idem, *Prolegomena*, 176.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid., 162.

60. Ibid., 161.

The traversing from absolute potentiality to actuality is not an independent process. It does not occur on its own. Instead, it is catalysed by the Active Intelligence, or theologically known as the Holy Spirit (*al-rūh al-qudus*), and of course ultimately God. In other words, it is God who not only creates the intellect, but also, through the mediacy of the Holy Spirit, actualises it and its operations.<sup>61</sup> This is what is meant by the connection to the higher order of existence.

Theoretical reason and the acquired intellect are where spiritual cognition occurs—intellection (the understanding of the individual reality of things) and intuition (the direct and immediate apprehension of the whole of existence). Therefore, the intellect is not meant only for survival, but also to apprehend the reality of existence and recognise God and, consequently, to govern his body in accordance with such recognition.

The anthropologists, although themselves are thinking creatures capable of all the operations of theoretical reason and acquired intellect, fail to have their conception of reason explain the ability to think and think about the thought that it is thinking—that is, intellection and intuition. The anthropological reason can explain only utilitarian thought geared towards survival (which is a fragment of what the practical reason does) and not meaning-making for life and existence. Indeed, it even fails to explain why anthropologists are curious about the origin of man itself. Aristotle, at least, asserts that “all men by nature desire to know,”<sup>62</sup> indicating an inherent nature in man and not a developed vocation.

Perhaps, they might argue that the “desire to know” is an exaptation of reason—since reason is no longer burdened with the preoccupation of survival, perhaps it can now do more thinking about things that it usually does not.

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61. This serves as a metaphysical explanation of the verse *al-Shu'arā'* (2): 192–196. See: *Ibid.*, 162; Muhammad Zaimiy Uthman, *Al-Attas's Psychology* (Kuala Lumpur: Himpunan Keilmuan Muslim, 2022), 54.

62. Aristotle, *The Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans. Rev. John M'Mahon (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896), 1.

Was There *ʿAql* before Adam?

### The Islamic definition of man

Man in the worldview of Islam is known as *insān*. The definition which is formulated to describe *insān* is *al-ḥayawān al-nāṭiq*.<sup>63</sup> He is named as such due to him being alive (*ḥayy*, from which *ḥayawān* is derived) and his ability of articulate speech (*nuṭq*, from which *nāṭiq* is derived), which stems from a faculty of his soul, known as the *al-naḥs al-nāṭiqah*.<sup>64</sup> In describing the significance of this definition, al-Attas explains in his *Islām: The Covenants Fulfilled*:

For this reason, that is the soul's possession of a cognitive power *enabling it to identify its Lord and Creator* (italics are mine), itself and other souls like itself, and to articulate and to discriminate and make distinctions as well as to formulate and communicate meaningful symbols by means of this power of speech that is called *nuṭq*, the soul is called *al-naḥs al-nāṭiqah*, the articulate soul.<sup>65</sup>

The phrase “enabling it to identify its Lord and Creator” is pertinent. It is clear, from this phrase alone, that three aspects of the Islamic definition of man are absent from the anthropological definition of human being: metaphysical, teleological, moral.

Defining man as a living being (*al-ḥayawān*), renders of utmost significance the term *ḥayy*, meaning alive, which is one of God's Beautiful Names (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*), thus linking God with everything that lives as its Originator and Sustainer of life (*al-Muḥyi*). The inclusion of God in this definition more than presupposes metaphysics. On the other hand, homo sapiens does not entail anything other than itself.

God is the Originator (*al-Awwal*); He is also the destination (*al-Ākhir*). This already involves teleology. Therefore, man and

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63. Al-Attas, *On Justice*, 31.

64. Ibid.

65. Idem, *Islām: The Covenants Fulfilled* (Kuala Lumpur: Ta'dib International, 2023), 1-2.

all his cognitive operations are oriented in this direction. As we have seen, purpose in the anthropological conception of man follows the organs instead of the other way around. Teleology implies a parameter, which defines the boundaries of meaning. An aspect of this parameter is moral, demarcating thus the moral meanings of *insān*, that is, man is expected to recognise God and acknowledge Him through *'ibādah*. His apprehension of the realities of things is to enable him to fulfil his role as *khalīfah*.<sup>66</sup> All this defines *insān*, and all are absent from the anthropological conception of human. In anthropology, conversely, survival is the mission. Therefore, there is no notion of duty; only rights defined by biological and adaptive might.

### **Conclusion**

In the Qur'ān, only Adam and his progenies (*Banī Adam*) are ascribed the title *insān* and *khalīfah*. The absence of mention of other beings should not be taken to provide ample space for other beings to be included as well. Although, logically, a mention of something does not necessarily entail a negation of something else, however, in religious matters, one should not make a claim without proofs (*dalīl*), for such an act presupposes religious authority (*al-shāri'*) other than God and the Prophet. The title *khalīfah* is a religious one, and therefore only God and the Prophet have the authority to bestow the title to whomsoever they desire.

One could argue that the title *insān* is not religiously sanctioned. In fact, it is to the contrary. As discussed above, the prerogatives of a *khalīfah* can only be executed by *insān* since only the latter has all the equipment required to perform the functions of the former. In this case, therefore, *khalīfah* and *insān* can be considered synonymous. For this reason, *insān*, too, carries too heavy a religious overtone to not be considered as religiously sanctioned.

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66. Idem, *Prolegomena*, 145; and *On Justice*, 19–23.

Was There *ʿAql* before Adam?

Pertaining to anthropology and palaeoanthropology, its history began during the Enlightenment period.<sup>67</sup> The intellectual milieu of the time had just witnessed the supposed success of science in expositing the rationalness of the natural physical world. This sense of triumph then seduced the men of science to bring the success of the science of nature into the realm of humans, i.e., the science of man.<sup>68</sup> With John Locke (d. 1704), who limited the channel of knowledge only to the senses with his *tabula rasa*, human behaviours began to be taken primarily influenced by his external environments rather than intrinsic and innate predisposition.<sup>69</sup>

And thus, during the next century and a half social science followed Locke in his conviction that despite differences in experience, reason, correctly applied, would eventually lead man, everywhere, to the same social institutions, moral beliefs, and scientific technical truths. Just as the information of the senses worked over by reason leads to an understanding of the laws of motion, so too would empirical inquiry eventually lead one to a knowledge of religious and moral verities.<sup>70</sup>

Such implication is observable in Jean Clottes above—that religion is a response towards the recollected contents of dreams instead of an inner spark kindled by God.

At the same time, historicism and seeds of evolutionism in the Romantic worldview shaped the intellectual framework with which the theory of evolution was inspired. The evolution of the natural world, therefore, becomes now also the evolution of mankind. While Locke (1632–1704) had prepared the ground zero, Darwin pointed the way forward. The metaphysical *Urgrund* of this phenomenon, therefore, is not God, but Nature.

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67. Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theories*, 8.

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*, 12

70. *Ibid.*, 13.

On the other hand, Adamic exceptionalism presupposes the Ash‘arite metaphysics which stresses God’s omnipotence and its resultant occasionalism. Consequently, conceding that, on the one hand, nature is regulated (if this word is even allowable) by randomness and, on the other, Adam is an exception to this randomness implies a limitation in God’s omnipotence, which is absurd.

Furthurmore, recent anthropology has done away with teleological evolution. Instead, the overarching paradigm is now non-linearity, since it is the only sensible implication of randomness.

For this reason, pre-Adam “humans” cannot be said to possess rationality in the sense envisaged within the worldview of Islam as *‘aql*. Therefore, one cannot say that the creatures that pre-existed Adam were rational or that they were humans in the sense Adam was, that is, as *insān*. Adamic exceptionalism, thus, can be said to be just another form of unnecessary compromise imposed as a questionable hermeneutics.

Was There *ʿAql* before Adam?

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