

THE CONCEPT OF EDUCATION IN ISLAM



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THE CONCEPT OF EDUCATION IN ISLAM

The meaning of education and of what it involves is of utmost importance in the formulation of a system of education and its implementation. Supposing I am asked: *What is education?*, and I answer: *Education is a process of instilling something into human beings*. In this answer ‘a process of instilling’ refers to the method and the system by which what is called ‘education’ is gradually imparted; ‘something’ refers to the content of what is instilled; and ‘human beings’ refers to the recipient of both the process and the content. Now the answer given above already encompasses the three fundamental elements that constitute education: the process, the content, the recipient; but it is not yet a definition because those elements are deliberately left vague. Furthermore, the way of formulating the sentence meant to be developed into a definition as given above gives the impression that what is emphasized is the *process*. Supposing I reformulate the answer: *Education is something progressively instilled into man*. Now here we still encompass the three fundamental elements inherent in education, but the order of precedence as to the important element that constitutes education is now the *content* and not the *process*. Let us consider this last formulation and proceed in analyzing the inherent concepts.

I shall begin with man, since the definition of man is already generally well known, and that is, that he is a ‘rational animal’. Since rationality defines man, we must at least have some idea as to what ‘rational’ means, and we all agree that it refers to ‘reason’. However, in Western intellectual history, the concept of *ratio* has undergone much controversy, and has become—at least from the Muslim point of view—problematic, for it has gradually become separated from the ‘intellect’ or *intellectus* in the process

of secularization of ideas that coursed through the history of Western thought since the periods of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Muslim thinkers did not conceive of what is understood as *ratio* as something separate from what is understood as *intellectus*; they conceived the ‘*aql* (عقل) as an organic unity of both *ratio* and *intellectus*. Bearing this in mind, the Muslims defined man as *al-ḥaywān al-nāṭiq*,¹ where the term *nāṭiq* signifies ‘rational’. Man is possessed of an inner faculty that *formulates meaning* (i.e. *dhū nuṭq* ذونطق)² and this formulation of meaning, which involves judgment and discrimination and clarification, is what constitutes his ‘rationality’. The terms *nāṭiq* and *nuṭq* are derived from a root that conveys the basic meaning of ‘speech’, in the sense of human speech, so that they both signify a certain *power and capacity in man to articulate words in meaningful pattern*. He is, as it were, a ‘language animal’, and the articulation of linguistic symbols into meaningful patterns is no other than the outward, visible and audible expression of the inner, unseen reality which we call ‘*aql*. The term ‘*aql* itself basically signifies a kind of ‘binding’ or ‘withholding’, so that in this respect ‘*aql* signifies an *innate property that binds and withholds objects of knowledge by means of words*. ‘*Aql* is synonymous with *qalb* (قلب) in the same way as *qalb*, which is a spiritual organ of cognition called the ‘heart’, is synonymous with ‘*aql*.³ The real nature of ‘*aql* is that it is a spiritual substance by which the rational soul (*al-naḥs al-nāṭiqah* النفس الناطقة) recognizes and distinguishes truth from

1. See for example, al-Jurjānī, *Kitāb al-Taʿrīfāt* (in Flugel’s edition, Beirut, 1969), 39.

2. See the article on *al-nuṭq* in al-Tahānawī, *Kashshāf Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Funūn*, 6 vols. (Beirut, 1966), vol. 6, 1418.

3. See ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, vol. II, 457, col: 2, foll.

falsehood.⁴ It is clear from this, and many more references which we have not mentioned, that the reality underlying the definition of man is this spiritual substance, which is indicated by everyone when he says “I”. When we speak of education, therefore, it must pertain to this reality of man, and not simply to his body and his animal aspect.⁵ In defining man as a rational animal, where we mean by ‘rational’ the capacity for understanding speech, and the power responsible for the formulation of meaning—which involves judgment, discrimination, distinction and clarification, and which has to do with the articulation of words or expressions in meaningful pattern—the meaning of ‘meaning’ in our present context, and based on the concept of *ma‘nā*), is the *recognition of the place of anything in a system*. Such recognition occurs when the *relation* a thing has with other things in the system becomes *clarified* and *understood*. The relation describes a certain *order*. Meaning, conceived in the way I have formulated above, is a mental image in which a word or expression is applied to denote it. When that word or expression becomes an idea, or a notion, in the mind (*‘aql* with reference to *nutq*) it is called the ‘understood’ (*mafḥūm*). As an intelligible form that is formed in answer to the question “what is it?”, it is called ‘essence’ (*māhiyyah*). Considered as something that exists outside the mind, that is, objectively, it is called ‘reality’ (*ḥaqīqah*: *حَقِيقَة*). Seen as a specific reality distinguished from the others, it is called ‘individuality’ or ‘individual existence’ (*huwiyyah*: *هُوِيَّة*).⁶ In this

4. See further, al-Jurjānī, 157.

5. On the concept of man and the relation between his real substance, his animality and his body, see for example al-Tahānawī, article on *al-insān*, vol. I, 75-8.

6. Consult, for example, al-Jurjānī, *op. cit.*, pp. 235-6; and al-Tahānawī, *op. cit.*, vol. 5, pp. 1084-5.

way and in the context of the present discussion we say that what constitutes meaning, or the definition of meaning, is *recognition of the place of anything in a system which occurs when the relation a thing has with others in the system becomes clarified and understood*. We say further that the relation describes a certain order. If every thing in any system were in the same place, then there could be no recognition, there could be no meaning, since there would be no relational criteria to judge, discriminate, distinguish and clarify. Indeed, there would be no 'system'. For recognition to be possible, there must be *specific difference*, there must be *essential relation* and, moreover, these must *remain*, for if the difference and the relation were not abiding but were in a state of constant change specifically and essentially, then recognition of things would be impossible, and meaning would perish. In this brief outline is already revealed the intrinsic connection between meaning and knowledge.

The second important element inherent in education is its *content*, which is here indicated as 'something'. This is done deliberately because even though we all know that it must refer to knowledge, we have still to determine what we mean by it. The teaching and learning of skills alone, however scientific, and no matter if what is taught and learned is encompassed in the general concept 'knowledge', does not necessarily constitute education. The teaching and learning of the human, natural and applied sciences alone does not constitute education in the sense we are clarifying. There is a 'something' in knowledge which if it is not inculcated will not make its teaching and learning and assimilation an education. In fact the 'something' that we allude to here is itself knowledge; indeed, it is knowledge of the *purpose* of seeking it. At this point we are compelled to ask: *What, then, is knowledge?* or: *What does knowledge consist of?* In the beginning, I referred to the fact that in accordance with Islamic tradition we understand definition as of two kinds: definition by *hadd* and

definition by *rasm*. By the former is meant a precise or concise specification of the distinctive characteristic of a thing; and by the latter is meant a description of the nature of a thing. This distinction reveals that there are things which we can define specifically to its precise, distinctive characteristic—such as in the case of the definition of man—and there are things which we cannot so define, but can define only by describing its nature. Knowledge comes under this latter category. There are many definitions describing the nature of knowledge, but what is of relevance here is the epistemological definition, since it is important to understand what the Islamic epistemological context involves and implies. Perhaps its greatest implication lies in its effect upon our vision of reality and truth and our methodology of research; our intellectual scope and practical application in planning for what is called ‘development’, which all bear upon our understanding of education. Muslims are in concerted agreement that all knowledge comes from God, and we also know that the manner of its arrival, and the faculties and senses that receive and interpret it are distinctly not the same. Since all knowledge comes from God and is interpreted by the soul through its spiritual and physical faculties, it follows that the most suitable definition would be that knowledge, with reference to God as being its origin, is the *arrival* (*ḥuṣūl*: *حصول*) *in the soul of the meaning of a thing or an object of knowledge*; and that with reference to the soul as being its interpreter, knowledge is the *arrival* (*wuṣūl*: *وصول*) *of the soul at the meaning of a thing or an object of knowledge*.⁷ We have said earlier that the world of nature, as depicted in the Glorious Qurʾān, is like a Great Open Book; and every detail therein, encompassing the farthest horizons and our

7. See al-Jurjānī, 160-61.

very selves, is like a word in that Great Book that speaks to man about its Author.⁸ Now the word as it really is is a sign, a symbol; and to know it as it really is is to know what it stands for, what it symbolizes, what it means. To study the word as word, regarding it as if it had an independent reality of its own, is to miss the real point of studying it; for regarded as such it is no longer a sign or a symbol, as it is being made to point to itself, which is not what it really is. So in like manner is the study of nature, of any thing, any object of knowledge in Creation, pursued in order to attain knowledge of it; if the expression ‘as it really is’ is taken to mean its alleged independent reality, essentially and existentially, as if it were something ultimate and subsistent—then such study is devoid of real purpose, and the pursuit of knowledge becomes a deviation from the truth, which necessarily puts into question the validity of such knowledge. For *as it really is*, a thing or an object of knowledge is other than what it is, and that ‘other’ is what it *means*. So just as the study of words as *words* leads to deviation from the real truth underlying them, in the same way the preoccupation in philosophy with things as *things* leads to the erroneous, ordinary level of experience belief in the existence of their alleged essences outside the mind, whereas in reality the so called *essences* are only mentally posited.⁹ A thing, like a word, is in reality ultimately a sign or a symbol that is apparent and is inseparable from another thing not equally apparent, in such wise that when the former is perceived the other, which cannot

8. For example: 41:53.

9. I refer here the ‘essentialist’ view of reality as opposed to the existentialist view. By ‘existentialist’, however, I do not in our present discussion refer to recent Western philosophical speculation called by that name, but to the Islamic view that existence (*wujūd*: وجود) constitutes the real essences of things.

be perceived and which is of one predicament as the former, is known. What we have outlined is in fact a summary exposition of the Qurʾānic concept of *āyah* as referring to words and things.¹⁰ That is why we have defined knowledge epistemologically as the arrival in the soul of the *meaning* of a thing, or the arrival of the soul at the *meaning* of a thing. The ‘meaning of a thing’ means the *right* meaning of it; and what is considered to be the ‘right’ meaning is in this context determined by the Islamic vision of reality and truth as projected by the Qurʾānic conceptual system. We may now recall our earlier reference to the relevance obtained between *tafsīr* and *taʾwīl* as valid methods of approach to knowledge and scientific methodology respecting our study and interpretation of the world of nature, and its significance in our conception of knowledge and education. In the same way that *tafsīr* and *taʾwīl* apply to the Glorious Qurʾān, involving its entire conceptual system, its reflected meanings in the *Ḥadīth* and *Sunnah* and in the things of the empirical world; so is the Book of the world of nature to be interpreted by scientific methods emulating those of *tafsīr* and *taʾwīl*, treating the things of the empirical world as ‘words’, as signs and symbols operating in a network of conceptual relations that altogether describe an organic unity reflecting the Noble Qurʾān itself. In this way also the Noble Qurʾān is the final authority that confirms the truth in our rational and empirical investigations. What we are saying is that knowledge, as referring to meaning, consists of the *recognition of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the recognition of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence.*

10. “For the meaning of *āyah* see, for example, Ibn Manẓūr, *op. cit.*, vol. 14, 62: col. I.

We said that there is a ‘something’ in knowledge which if it is not inculcated will not make its teaching and learning and assimilation an education, We said further that this ‘something’ is knowledge of the purpose of seeking it. Now when knowledge, which is here defined as recognition of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to recognition of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence, is made the content of education, it still would not suffice to render the education an *education* in the sense we are clarifying—unless that ‘something’ in knowledge is included in the definition of knowledge. For *recognition* alone of the proper places of things and of God does not necessarily imply concomitant *action* on the part of man to behave in accordance with the suitable requirements of what is recognized. True recognition must be followed by acknowledgement, otherwise the recognition is in vain. Acknowledgement, like recognition, pertains to man and consists in man making himself suitable to the requirements of the right or proper places of things or affairs. The requirements of the proper places of things and affairs entail action on the part of man, and this action is denoted by the term ‘*amal*’. From this it is now clear that the ‘something’ in knowledge that we must have to realize education is *acknowledgement* of the proper places of things and of God that is recognized as existing in the order of creation and of being and existence. So now we are in a position to complete our definition of the content of education as: *recognition and acknowledgement of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the recognition and acknowledgement of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence.*

In our definition of knowledge, that is, of what knowledge consists and of the content of education, we notice that the concept of ‘proper place’ pertains to two domains of application: on the one hand it refers to the ontological domain which

includes man and the world of empirical things, and on the other to the theological domain which includes the religious and ethical aspects of human existence. 'Proper' place means 'real' and 'true' place as denoted by the term *ḥaqq*, for *ḥaqq* signifies both reality and truth pertaining to the two domains. *Ḥaqq* signifies a judgment or *ḥukm* conforming with reality or the real situation. This judgment involves statements or uttered words or propositions, religious beliefs, religions and schools of thought. The exact opposite of *ḥaqq* is *bāṭil*, meaning falsehood, something vain, futile. The term *ḥaqq*, then, basically signifies a suitability to the requirements of wisdom and justice.¹¹ We understand by 'justice' (*ʿadl*) a harmonious condition of things being in their right or proper places. By 'wisdom' (*ḥikmah*) we mean the knowledge given by God, by which the recipient is able to effect correct judgments as to the proper places of things. Thus when we speak of the truth of a matter as the suitability of a fact or a reality to a judgment, we mean by that judgment that which is derived from wisdom. Truth or *ḥaqq* is then a *suitableness to the requirements of the proper places of things as recognized by true judgment*. The notion of right or proper places involves *necessity* for things to be in that condition, to be deployed in a certain order, arranged according to various 'levels' (*marātib*) and 'degrees' (*darajāt*). Ontologically, things are already *so* arranged, but man, out of ignorance of the just order pervading all creation, makes alterations and confuses the places of things such that injustice occurs. When the truth of the matter is revealed to man and recognized by him, it then becomes incumbent upon him to guide his conduct so as to conform with

11. Confer al-Jurjānī, p. 94 See also al-Taftāzānī's commentary of the *ʿAqīdah* of al-Nasafī, Cairo, 1335 A.H., 15-6.

that truth. By his conformity with that truth, he is in effect putting himself in *his* proper place. Recognition of the truth in both domains, the ontological and the theological, necessitates in man a conduct that conforms with that truth. Thus *ḥaqq* also signifies 'duty' or 'obligation' that binds in accordance with the requirements of reality and truth.¹² When in Islam we speak of man as possessing 'right(s)' in the sense of just claim or what he is entitled to, we mean by that his duty or obligation as described above. Thus 'acknowledgement' as the fundamental element in true 'recognition' in the Islamic concept of education means 'affirmation and confirmation' or 'realization' and 'actualization' in one's self of what is recognized. This is denoted by the term *taḥqīq* (تحقيق), which is derived from the same root as *ḥaqq*. Acknowledgement of what is recognized is what renders education an education; otherwise, recognition alone is but a 'learning' (*ta'allum*).

At this stage of our exposition of the concept of education in Islam, we have already brought to bear upon it many of the key concepts that form the basic vocabulary of the Islamic conceptual system. We have briefly explained the concepts of meaning (*ma'nā*); knowledge (*ilm*); justice (*adl*); wisdom (*ḥikmah*); action (*amal*); right or proper in respect of what is true and real (*ḥaqq*); of reason (*nuṭq*); self (*nafs*); heart (*qalb*); mind and intellect (*aql*); hierarchical order in creation (*marātib* and *darajāt*); words, signs and symbols (*āyāt*); interpretation (*tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*). We have woven these concepts together in meaningful

12. A fuller treatment of the concepts of justice (*adl*), wisdom (*ḥikmah*), injustice (*zulm*), truth (*ṣidq*), untruth (*kidhb*) is to be found in my *Islām: the Concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality*, (ISTAC: Kuala Lumpur, 1976), 23-4, 25-7.

pattern, elucidating the concept of education peculiar to Islam, which we now define as: *recognition and acknowledgement, progressively instilled into man, of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the recognition and acknowledgement of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence.* There is one other key concept which in reality is central to education and the educational process, because the others we have mentioned all focus their meanings in this context toward it alone, such that by itself it stands sufficient as the precise term to denote education. This is because the key concept alluded to identifies itself as the ‘something’ in knowledge which is knowledge of the purpose of seeking it. This major key concept is couched in the term *adab* (أَدَبٌ).

Adab is the discipline of body, mind and soul; the discipline that assures the recognition and acknowledgement of one’s proper place in relation to one’s physical, intellectual and spiritual capacities and potentials; the recognition and acknowledgement of the reality that knowledge and being are ordered hierarchically according to their various levels (*marātib*) and degrees (*darajāt*). Since *adab* refers to recognition and acknowledgement of the right and proper place, station, and condition in life, and to self-discipline in positive and willing participation in enacting one’s role in accordance with that recognition and acknowledgement, its actualization in one and in society as a whole reflects the condition of justice (‘*adl*). Justice itself is a reflection of wisdom (*ḥikmah*), which we have already defined as that God-given knowledge which enables the recipient to discover the right and proper place for a thing or a being to be. The *condition* of being in the proper place is what we have called justice; and *adab* is the method of knowing by which we *actualize* the condition of being in the proper place. So *adab*, in the sense I am defining here, is also a reflection of wisdom; and with respect to society *adab* is the just order within it. *Adab*,

concisely defined, is the *spectacle* (*mashhad*: مشهد) of justice as it is reflected by wisdom.

We said that *adab* identifies itself as knowledge of the purpose of seeking knowledge. The purpose of seeking knowledge in Islam is to inculcate goodness in man as man and individual self. The end of education in Islam is to produce a good man, and not—as in the case of Western civilization—to produce a good citizen. By ‘good’ in the concept of good man is meant precisely the man of *adab* in the sense here explained as encompassing the spiritual and material life of man. For man, before he became manifested as man, has sealed an individual covenant (*mīthāq*: ميثاق) collectively with God, and has recognized and acknowledged God as Lord (*al-rabb*: الربّ) when he witnessed unto his self and affirmed ‘Yea!’ (*balā*) to God’s ‘Am I not your Lord? (*alastu bi rabbikum*).¹³ This means that before he assumed physical form man has been equipped with the faculty of spiritual cognition (*maʿrifah*), and was able to recognize and acknowledge, by the fact of what he said in affirmation (*qawl*) through his intellectual power of speech (*nutq*), the reality and truth of his existential condition in relation to his Lord, that is, his Possessor, Creator Sustainer, Cherisher, Provider. Indeed, this Covenant, and what it implies, is the very essence of religion (*al-dīn*) as enacted in Islam, for all the principles of Islam ultimately revert to that spiritual, preexistent condition.¹⁴ So the men of spiritual discernment have referred to man in that spiritual condition as *al-nafs al-nātiqah*—the rational soul. The other aspect of man’s nature is what refers to his manifestation in physical form: (*al-nafs al-hayawāniyyah*)—the animal soul. Man

13. Q. 7: 172.

14. See work cited in note 11.

then is a 'double associate'; a single being possessing a dual nature with two souls (*nafsān*) analogous to it; the one higher in relation to the other. It is the recognition and acknowledgement by the lower animal self of its proper place in relation to the higher rational self that constitutes for that lower self its *adab*. 'Recognition' means discovering the proper place in relation to what is recognized; and acknowledgement means concomitant action (*'amal*) resulting from discovering the proper place in relation to what is recognized. Recognition alone without acknowledgement is mere arrogance; for it is the *ḥaqq* of recognition to be acknowledged. Acknowledgement alone without recognition is mere ignorance; for it is the *ḥaqq* of acknowledgement to actualize recognition. Either one by itself is *bāṭil*, for in Islam there is no worthwhile knowledge without action accompanying it, nor worthwhile action without knowledge guiding it. *The just* man is he who effects such *adab* unto his self, resulting in his being a *good* man.

The concept of *adab* as I have formulated here is construed from its meaning as understood in the early, Islamic sense, before its restriction to the context revolving around the concept of cultural refinement pertaining to letters and social etiquette, which was effected to a considerable extent by the innovations of the literary geniuses. In its original, basic sense, *adab* is the *inviting to a banquet*. The idea of a banquet implies that the host is a man of honour and prestige, and that many people are present; that the people who are present are those who, in the host's estimation, are deserving of the honour of the invitation, and they are therefore people of refined qualities and upbringing who are expected to behave as befits their station in speech, conduct and etiquette. The islamization of this basic concept of *adab* as an invitation to a banquet, together with all the conceptual implications inherent in it, which even then already involved knowledge, is significantly and profoundly

expressed in a *ḥadīth* narrated by Ibn Mas‘ūd, where the Noble Qur’ān itself is described as God’s invitation to a banquet on earth, in which we are exhorted to partake of it by means of acquiring real knowledge of it:¹⁵

أَنَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ مَأْدِبَةٌ لِلَّهِ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَتَعَلَّمُوا مِنْ مَأْدِبَتِهِ

The Discerning Qur’ān is God’s invitation to a spiritual banquet, and the acquiring of real knowledge of it is the partaking of the fine food in it. In the same sense that the enjoyment of fine food in a banquet is greatly enhanced by noble and gracious company, and that the food be partaken of in accordance with the rules of refined conduct, behaviour and etiquette, so is knowledge to be extolled and enjoyed, and approached by means of conduct as befits its lofty nature. Thus the men of discernment speak of that knowledge as the *food and life* of the soul; it is that which makes the soul alive. The *ta’wīl* interpreting the meaning of ‘the living’ (*al-ḥayy*) as ‘the knowing’ (*al-‘ālim*) in the passage: ‘He brings forth the living from the dead’,¹⁶ indeed refers to this knowledge as the food and life of the soul. Ultimately, real knowledge of it is the ‘tasting of its flavour’, the ‘spiritual savouring’ (*dharwq*) that men of discernment speak of, which almost simultaneously unveils the reality and truth of the matter to the spiritual vision (*kashf*). In virtue of this, *adab* involves action to *discipline* the *mind and soul*; it is acquisition of the *good qualities and attributes* of mind and soul; it is to *perform* the *correct* as against the erroneous *action*, of *right or proper* as against *wrong*; it is the *preserving from disgrace*. Thus *adab* as the disciplinary action, the selective acquisition, the correct performance and the qualitative preservation, together

15. See Ibn Manẓūr, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 206.

16. Q. 2:164.

with the knowledge that they involve, constitutes the actualization of the purpose of knowledge. When we say that the purpose of knowledge is to produce a good man, we do not mean that to produce a good society is not its purpose, for since society is composed of people, making every one or most of them good produces a good society. Education is the fabric of society. The emphasis on *adab* which includes *‘amal* in education and the educational process is to ensure that *‘ilm* is being put to good use in society. For this reason the sages, men of discernment and the learned scholars among the Muslims of earlier times combined *‘ilm* with *‘amal* and *adab*, and conceived their harmonious combination as education. Education is in fact *ta’dīb* (تأديب), for *adab* as here defined already involves both *‘ilm* and *‘amal*.

In the *ḥadīth* cited above, the conceptual connection between *‘ilm* and *adab* is already established. In yet another, more well known *ḥadīth*, not only is the conceptual connection between the two concepts established in an even more direct way, but it is expressed in such a manner as to imply *identity* between *adab* and *‘ilm*. The *ḥadīth* I refer to is one in which the Prophet, upon whom be Peace, said: “My Lord educated me, and so made my education most excellent” (أدبني ربي فأحسن تأديبي). The word I have translated as ‘educated’ is *addaba*, which according to Ibn Manẓūr, is synonymous with *‘allama*,¹⁷ and which al-Zajjāj attributed to God’s manner of teaching His Prophet. The infinite noun of *addaba*: *ta’dīb*, which I have translated as ‘education’, signifies the same, and we have its conceptual counterpart in the term *ta’līm*. In our definition of meaning, we said that meaning is the *recognition of the place of anything in a system*. Since knowledge

17. *Op. cit.*, vol. I, 206, col. 2.

consists of the arrival—in both senses, of *ḥuṣūl* and *wuṣūl* of meaning in and by the soul, we defined knowledge as the *recognition of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the recognition of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence*. In order to render knowledge an education we included the fundamental element of acknowledgement in the recognition, and we defined this content of education as the *recognition and acknowledgement of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the recognition and acknowledgement of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence*. Then we defined education, including the educational process, as the *recognition and acknowledgement, progressively instilled into man, of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the recognition and acknowledgement of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence*. Since meaning, knowledge and education pertain to man alone, and by extension to society, the recognition and acknowledgement of the proper places of things in the order of creation, must primarily apply to man's own recognition and acknowledgement of *his* proper place—that is, his station and condition in life in relation to his self, his family, his people, his community, his society—and to his self-discipline in actualizing within his self the recognition by the acknowledgement. This means that he must know his place in the human order, which must be understood as arranged hierarchically and legitimately into various degrees (*darajāt*) of excellence based on the *Qur'ānic* criteria of intelligence, knowledge, and virtue (*iḥsān*), and must act concomitantly with the knowledge in a positive, commendable and praiseworthy manner. This self-recognition actualized in self-acknowledgement is the *adab* here defined. When we say that acknowledgement is the fundamental element in true recognition; and that acknowledgement of what is recognized is what renders education an education, we are referring primarily

to proper places in the human order, and in the order of knowledge and being. *Adab* is knowledge that preserves man from errors of judgment. *Adab* is *recognition and acknowledgement of the reality that knowledge and being are ordered hierarchically according to their various grades and degrees of rank, and of one's proper place in relation to that reality and to one's physical, intellectual and spiritual capacities and potentials.* In the light of the foregoing definitions and explanations, the words of the Prophet, when he said: “My Lord educated me, and so made my education most excellent,” may be paraphrased in the following way: “My Lord made me to recognize and acknowledge, by what (*i.e. adab*) He progressively instilled into me, the proper places of things and the order of creation, such that it led to my recognition and acknowledgement of His proper place in the order of being and existence; and by virtue of this, He made my education most excellent.”

