

CHAPTER ONE

Contemplation: A Modern Psychological Perspective

ISLAMIC CONTEMPLATION AND SECULAR PSYCHOLOGY

It may seem rather impertinent to discuss Islamic contemplation (*tafakkur*), which is one of the most exalted forms of worship in Islam, from the viewpoint of modern Western psychology – a secular and largely culture-bound discipline stocked with pseudo-knowledge disguised in the prestigious cloak of a science. However, since the Muslim laity and most students of psychology in the East are still dazzled by whatever is exported to them from the West, I realized the importance of starting the book with this chapter. I hope that this exposition will be helpful to Muslim lecturers who still teach Islamic ethics from Western psychoanalytically oriented textbooks on the psychology of religion. Though they claim to be Islamizing psychology, they may be unknowingly secularizing Islam! Since most of the readers of this book will probably not have studied modern Western psychology, I have intentionally simplified my exposition. Similarly, I felt that an in-depth critique of modern psychology from the Islamic perspective of contemplation as a form of worship would be too tedious for the general reader.

Contemplation as an Islamic form of worship may, at first, be viewed within the sphere of the recent interest of Western psychology in meditation procedures and their ability to bring about altered states of consciousness. However, although Islamic contemplation can achieve the relaxing benefits of meditation, as we shall see later, it differs from all the other forms of meditative procedures which are derived from Eastern religions in that its main objective is more cognitive and intellectual. In Islamic contemplation, altered states of consciousness are

not an end in themselves, as the goal is a deeper insightful knowledge of God as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Consequently, an in-depth psychological discussion of Islamic contemplation would fall within the field of cognitive psychology, with special reference to the psychology of thinking.

The field of cognitive psychology, in its unrefined form, was the focus of the early schools of psychology before behaviorism became dominant. In those days, psychology was used mainly to study people's consciousness, their feelings, the content of their thoughts and the structure of their minds, attending to the question of learning only through these vistas. The behaviorist school introduced a totally new approach, where learning could be studied via stimuli and observable responses and became the basis of psychology; feelings, the components of the mind, and the process of thinking were considered questions that could not be observed directly, and the methods used to study them (such as introspection, and the observation and reporting of inner experiencing) were criticized as being vague and unreliable and could not be controlled by experimental procedures. Accordingly, the behaviorists who wanted psychology to become an exact experimental science, like physics and chemistry, restricted their work to phenomena that could be observed in the laboratory, and the responses that could be measured and controlled became the focus of their experimental and scientific concerns. On the other hand, the cognitive and emotional activities which take place inside the human being were considered something of a closed black box with contents that could not be observed, and for which, consequently, no time should be wasted in studying. Thus, the behaviorist vision of humans was that they were mere machines that, when exposed to specified stimuli, would react with responses which the researcher could control and predict. This approach automatically removed contemplation from being an area of psychological inquiry.

This effort to emulate physical and biological sciences by ignoring a person's spiritual and inner cognitive activities was unequivocally established by J. B. Watson, the founding father of behaviorism. He emphasized that people should be viewed as nothing more than animals; they are different from other animals only in the types of observable

behavior that they perform. To be scientific, psychologists should therefore not allow themselves to study humans in any manner different from their work with animals. He writes that,

[behaviorism] attempts to do one thing: to apply to the experimental study of man the same kind of procedure and the same language of description that many research men had found useful for so many years in the study of animals lower than man. We believed then, as we believe now, that man is an animal different from other animals only in the types of behavior he displays.

The raw fact is that you, as a psychologist, if you are to remain scientific, must describe the behavior of man in no other terms than those you would use in describing the behavior of the ox you slaughter.¹

Influenced by this constricted perspective, and encouraged by Ivan Pavlov's contributions to learning by conditioning, behaviorists went on to explain every human mental and psychological activity through the vision of stimulus-response connectionism. Even the process of thinking was explained in terms of a network of stimulus-response associations and considered as no more than a soliloquy.

The principal aim of this dehumanization of people was to mould psychology into a scientific cast. Another major objective was the secularization of Western societies and their emancipation from the grip of religion. In this connection, Watson clearly laments the fact that humans do not accept being classified as animals, and naïvely believe that God created them and that there is life after death. He states:

Human beings do not want to class themselves with other animals. They are willing to admit that they are animals but 'something else in addition'. It is the 'something else' that causes the trouble. In this 'something else' is bound up everything that is classed as religion, the hereafter, morals, love of children, parents, country, and the like.²

From what has been said, it is obvious that behaviorism adamantly denies that humans have an innate good or evil nature, and that what they believe in is neither true nor false. Like a dry leaf on a windy day,

their nature, values and beliefs are completely determined by environmental stimuli; there is no place in the behavioristic conception for any global ethical truths or moral standards. It also excludes any notion of human freedom of choice and any conscious moral or spiritual decision-making. Talking about contemplation and internal cognitive spiritual notions and feelings within the bounds of such a psychology would be inconceivable. The renowned British neurologist, John Eccles, endorses this criticism of behaviorism, saying that during the long dark night of the dominance of behaviorism,

words like mind, consciousness, thoughts, purposes and beliefs were considered 'dirty' words unallowable in 'polite' philosophical discourse. Ironically, the most prominent philosophical obscenities were a new class of four-letter-words – mind, self, soul, will.³

Though other dominant perspectives and schools of psychology such as psychoanalysis and the biological perspective had, and still have, bitter disagreements with the behaviorists, they are in complete harmony when it comes to secularization and the downgrading of conscious thinking. Classical Freudian psychoanalysis, for instance, sees human behavior as fully determined by one's unconscious sexual and aggressive impulses, which means that people's conscious ideas, their contemplation, their judgments and their reasoning are but by-products of a deeper concealed mind of which they are unaware. Freud considered religion itself as an illusion and a mass obsessional neurosis!

Traditional neuropsychiatry, which is strongly based on an 'organicist' biological perspective, also depreciates the significance of conscious ideation, freedom of choice, and the unchanging spiritual moral standards of a human being. Biological determinism, in its exaggerated form, claims that anything, normal or abnormal, that people do is fully governed by their inherited genes, their nervous system, and inborn biochemistry. As one researcher describes it, "Behind any twisted idea or action, there is a twisted molecule in the brain." Theoretically, they believe that the way these inborn biological aspects interact with the environment is like a program in a computer's

hard disk: if you happen to know all the particulars and variables you can predict accurately the future behavior of the person concerned. Consequently, they explain much of human ethical behavior, that religion has always considered to be the conscious choices of people and for which they should bear responsibility, in terms of irresistible biological determinism. For instance, a number of studies have tried to prove that promiscuity, homosexuality and lesbianism are deep-seated biologically programmed urges, and that people should not, therefore, be condemned for following the instincts created by their genes.

If studying Islamic contemplation from the psychological point of view necessarily deals with the conscious inner cognitive thought and feelings of people, then these three dominant perspectives of Western psychology (behaviorism, Freudian psychoanalysis and neuropsychiatry) can offer little or no help. Indeed, two of these perspectives see humans as mechanical creatures dominated by external stimuli or biological and biochemical factors and, according to the third, our conscious thinking and feelings are simply a deception by our unconscious and ego defense mechanisms. It is not surprising, therefore, that these psychological schools and their artificial oversimplification of complex cognitive activities and feelings, in spite of securing respect for many years by providing scientific explanations of human behavior, have failed to provide satisfactory results. The optimism of fifty years ago has now dissipated, and the social and psychological problems of Western societies are probably the only variables that have surpassed economic inflation in their sharp increase. Their failure is not surprising since the psychology of humankind, with all its complex variables and spiritual aspects, could never be reduced to the chemical and physical data of laboratory experiments.

Precise disciplines such as physics and chemistry have made astonishing advances, not only because of the long period of their historic development – as some psychologists have us believe – but also, and more importantly, because of their purely material nature. These two disciplines built basic units of measurement and comprehensive theories to explain the behavior of matter and energy and their precise interaction. The two factors of matter and energy are fundamental

because, without the concept of the atom and its components of protons and electrons, the experimental sciences could not have achieved so much. The same thing could be said about the cell as a basic unit in biology, or about the genes in the study of heredity.

In psychology, however, the complex nature of human behavior and its non-materialistic nature does not allow for such basic units or major underlying concepts. Any attempt to override this fact is inevitably met with failure and soon forgotten. We may take the concept of the conditioned reflex as an example to illustrate this difficulty, because it was regarded as one of the simplest concepts in psychology and was endorsed by many behaviorists.

What is a conditioned reflex? A hungry dog hears the sound of a bell and is immediately given some dried meat. The process is repeated until the dog salivates to the sound of the bell. This salivation to an artificial stimulus – the bell – is known as a conditioned reflex. Conditioning can also easily be applied to humans, such as when they learn to respond reflexively to a flashing light with a knee-jerk, or to the sound of a bell by blinking. Though this phenomenon was described by early Muslim scholars such as Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī, it was first studied experimentally by Ivan Pavlov, the famous Russian physiologist.

Learning by conditioning can definitely explain some aspects of simple learning, but it cannot be taken as a serious unit in psychology because many areas of psychology are not based on such simple stimulus-response connections. For example, social psychology, humanistic psychology, perception, language-learning, and similar fields cannot be reduced to the simple stimulus-response paradigm of conditioning. Similarly, the deep and complex aspects of human behavior cannot be explained by conditioning laws. For example, how could one explain 'love' using stimuli and conditioned reflexes? The complex nature of this behavior has no room for such extreme fragmentation.

The same difficulties also prevented psychology from formulating a comprehensive theory like Einstein's theory of relativity in physics or Darwin's theory of evolution. Although recent scientific discoveries have now revealed certain flaws in the latter, it still serves as a general and comprehensive biological theory. Some schools and perspectives in modern psychology, such as psychoanalysis, Gestalt psychology and

learning theory, tried to formulate an all-embracing theory, but none succeeded and their efforts simply became part of the history of Western psychology.⁴

These successive failures were evidently a logical outcome of the unreasonable efforts of modern psychologists to transform their discipline into an experimental science by neglecting people's inner feelings, consciousness, minds, and mental processes, as they had previously removed from them their souls and spiritual essence. This deformed approach was, from the start, strongly opposed by a number of clear-sighted scholars such as the British psychologist, Cyril Burt, who is often quoted to have said that psychology lost its soul, then its mind, and finally its consciousness, as if it were preparing itself for an ultimate demise.⁵

ISLAMIC CONTEMPLATION AND THE COGNITIVE REVOLUTION

One may not be as surprised to see the downfall of this distorted image of humankind in modern psychology as to realize that it took so long for Western psychologists to correct it. Psychology had to undergo a complete revolution to be able to reinstate its 'mind' and rediscover its inner conscious cognitive activities. This revolution is the contemporary cognitive revolution. Scholars began to show more interest in thinking and inner cognitive processes from about the middle of the twentieth century, but it took psychology several decades to recognize the superficiality of stimulus-response behaviorism and the unscientific distorted nature of the theories of psychoanalysis. This marked a return to the study of the internal mental activities used by people in analyzing and classifying information taken from their environment.

This new perspective in psychology is particularly important in that it shows the value of contemplation from both the scientific and religious points of view. Though this cognitive approach may be considered a return to the early stages of psychology, the methods used are much more advanced and depend on technologies especially devised to study human cognitive activities, on recent developments in neuroscience and, more importantly, on the computer revolution. Specialized research in these disciplines has clearly exposed the limited

concept of a mechanical human being as adopted by behaviorism; this concept has been replaced with that of a human being as an ‘information processor’.

When modern scholars compare people’s thinking, inner cognitive and emotional processes and memory to a computer, they are describing the fact that they receive various stimuli from their environment, then code, classify and store them in their memory, to retrieve them when they need to solve new problems. In this simple analogy, receiving information from the environment corresponds to typing on the keyboard of a computer or feeding it in some other way; the central processing unit with its loaded software corresponds to the mind with its internal cognitive activity, like thinking and feeling; and the mental or behavioral responses that the person performs corresponds to what the computer shows on its monitor. The computer reacts differently to a specific letter struck on its keyboard according to the particular software program used and, similarly, people react differently to a specific stimuli to which they are subjected in their environment. Following the same logic, as we know exactly what kind of software is loaded in our computers, we should strive to know what ‘software’ is loaded in our minds as it is this ‘software’ which makes us think, feel and behave in the way we do. Thus the simple behavioristic conception of limiting research in psychology to stimuli that directly bring about responses has been equivocated.

It is interesting to note that although psychology and other social sciences continue to support the secular reductionistic view of human nature, they have changed their image of the human being according to progressive developments in technology. This computer model of the human being is clearly more realistic than the behaviorist model, since it tries to restore to modern psychology its ‘mind’ and ‘consciousness’, yet it obviously falls short of the true spiritual Islamic vision of humankind. Western psychology is still obsessed with an outdated tunnel-vision ‘scientific’ model. Furthermore, a paradigm shift in psychology, as in other social sciences, does not bring about a real revolution. Thomas Kuhn, the philosopher who popularized the concept of ‘paradigm’ and author of *The Structure of Scientific*

Revolutions, said that, “the more developed sciences had paradigms, but psychology didn’t.”⁶

This is obviously true, since in developed sciences a ‘paradigm shift’ results in a real revolution, where the new paradigm overthrows and replaces the old, just as Einstein’s theories completely transformed Newtonian physics. In psychology and other social sciences, new paradigms – if we can call them so – generate much enthusiasm and attract many followers, but do not replace the old paradigms that continue to survive and sometimes flourish again a few years later. Thus, though the cognitive revolution is causing major changes in modern psychology, it cannot be considered a real rebellion against earlier concepts.

The real revolution in psychology will come when it regains its ‘soul’ and liberates itself from the constricted scientific and medical models for erecting an image of human nature. Indeed, the interaction of biological, psychological, and socio-cultural factors to produce a ‘complex’ of a thinking and behaving human being – as Western psychology still upholds – can never be as simple as the interaction of hydrogen, oxygen and carbon which occurs in photosynthesis when plants use solar energy to produce molecules of glucose from water and carbon dioxide.

However, even the revolution of cognitive psychology, which attempted to free the discipline from its constricted approach, still limits itself to this trio of psychological, biological and socio-cultural components of human behavior and mental processes. It has also ignored the spiritual component, despite increasing modern scientific evidence regarding its importance. By limiting itself to these three components because they are more easily defined compared with the spiritual aspect, or by simply rejecting the spiritual aspect because it emanates from a religious vision, modern psychology will remain ambiguous, inefficient and at a loss. It is like someone who anticipates the formation of glucose by the process of photosynthesis using the three elements of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen, but excluding solar energy simply because it is more sublime and less concrete. However, it must be stressed that even without the spiritual faith factor and despite the advance of knowledge, the study of these internal mental processes will always be a highly complex field

where stimuli and their responses, causes and their effects interact in a manner which defies any sophisticated method of observation or measurement.

CONTEMPLATION AND THE BODY / MIND ENIGMA

The study of the internal psychological and mental world of the human being brings us face to face with one of man's most difficult questions: what is the connection between the body and the mind? The answer to this question is a medley of philosophical ideas, religious beliefs, psychological studies, biological and organic research findings about humankind in general, and the human brain and nervous system in particular. Discussing this issue in any detail is clearly beyond the bounds of this book. However, we cannot avoid a major controversy which is of relevance to our investigation on Islamic contemplation from the perspective of current psychobiological studies.

Though we know very little about the activities of the human brain, the materialists claim that the human being does not possess a 'mind', unless this word is used to mean the material 'brain' inside the skull. They also claim that what we call a 'thinking mind' is nothing but the reflections and 'translations' of the minute changes in the chemistry of the brain and its electrochemical nervous pulses – their justification being that people's thinking, and indeed their entire characters, change when the brain is damaged. This stand is obviously supported by behaviorists and other secular psychologists.

The opposing group affirms that there is a 'mind' that controls the brain and, ultimately, a person's behavior and thinking. Chief among this group is the neurologist, John Eccles, who won a Nobel Prize for his outstanding research on the nervous system. This scholar and the scientists who uphold his assertion affirm that their researches on the activity of the human brain and the nervous system can only be fully explained by the existence of a 'mind', a 'realizing soul', or what Eccles calls a 'self-conscious mind'.⁷ They contend further that this non-material entity fully controls the nervous and behavioral activity of a human being. If the brain was the only entity governing the human

cognitive processes and behavior, as materialists claim, no person would or could contest an action or decision taken by his brain. However, this is clearly not the case. Indeed, if, for example, a male volunteer is electrically stimulated in a certain part of the motor area of the cerebral cortex, he will respond with a jerking movement of his arm; if he is told not to move his arm, and the electrical stimulation of the brain is repeated, he will find his arm moving in spite of him; and if this process is repeated again, he may try to stop the movement of that arm with his other arm. This can be performed experimentally. Eccles would argue: if the brain was the only governing body, then the subject would not have negated what his brain had ordered; however, as this is not the case, then what caused the arm to move and what tried to stop it? Clearly, the brain moved it, and the mind tried to stop it.

Eccles and various other scholars often use the image of the relationship between a broadcasting station and a television set to explain the relationship between the mind and the brain. According to Eccles, the non-material, self-conscious, mind continuously scans, probes and controls the brain.⁸ If the brain is damaged or if the person is unconscious, the mind will continue to do its job, but the outcome will depend on the quality and efficiency of reception by the brain. Similarly, if a television set develops a fault, the image it conveys will be disturbed or may disappear completely. Therefore, to say that the brain is the only element involved is a very naïve conception, just like the belief of a little child that the persons and images that appear on the television screen are actually inside the television set! This was the exact statement made by my four-year-old niece, Amina, when I told her that our guest, Hamid Umar al-Imam, was the distinguished shaykh who chanted the Qur'an every morning on Omdurman Radio. She said: "But Uncle, how can such a big man get inside our small radio?"

In the impressive volume, *The Self and Its Brain*, that Eccles wrote with the renowned philosopher Karl Popper, the author comes very close to agreeing with the religious belief about the immortality of the soul. As an open-minded scientist, convinced by his research on the existence of a self-conscious mind, he asks himself: what happens to this mind after death?

Finally, of course we come to the ultimate picture, what happens in death? Then all cerebral activity ceases permanently. The self-conscious mind that has had an autonomous existence in a sense...now finds that the brain it had scanned and probed and controlled so efficiently and effectively through a long life is no longer giving any messages at all. What happens then is the ultimate question.⁹

As Eccles has asserted, what takes place after the death of the brain is the ultimate question that will continue to haunt scholars as well as lay people. It will forever mystify us because God decreed that knowledge about the true nature of the soul or spirit, how it interacts with the body and what happens to it after death, was to be a strictly guarded secret curtailed from us in this world. Indeed, knowing what happens after death would necessarily reveal the secret of our soul and spirit and, if this happened, then the whole religious conviction of this life as a testing place would be invalidated. When asked about the spirit, Prophet Muhammad received the following revelation: "They ask you about the spirit. Say, 'The spirit is of the command of my Lord. It is only a little knowledge about it that is communicated to you'" (17:85). Thus, knowledge of the true nature of the spirit is unattainable. And for this reason, Islam urges the Muslim worshipper to concentrate his contemplative efforts on the attainable. The complete answer to this question will therefore remain unresolved.

Some scholars may believe that trying to tackle this problem from the purely biological aspect may be easier and 'scientifically' more straightforward than the more intangible philosophical, religious or psychological aspects. However, the truth of the matter is that the biological perspective is not less complicated; in fact, it could be even more complicated since an in-depth investigation in biology and physics can often end up in philosophy and spirituality. In his valuable book, *The Psychobiology of the Mind*, W. Uttal says that all the modern research and discoveries about the workings of the human brain have not brought us any closer to solving the problem of the relation between body and mind.¹⁰ In fact, they have simply added new questions; the basic questions asked in the days of Aristotle, more than 2,000 years ago, are still waiting for satisfactory answers.

Another complication raised by modern biological research about the relation between body and mind is the role of the human heart in influencing the brain and shaping neural behavior. According to Joseph Pearce in his thought-provoking book, *Evolution's End*, the human heart is much more than a pumping station; it is the organ that alerts the brain to carry out appropriate responses. Neuro-transmitters, which play an important role in the functioning of the brain, have been found in the heart. He says: "Actions in the heart precede the actions of both body and brain...We know now that the heart...controls and governs the brain action through hormonal, transmitter, and possibly finer quantum-energies of communication."¹¹

If what Pearce says is true, then artificial plastic hearts will not be able to do what a real or transplanted heart can do. It would also mean that a person who receives a transplanted heart will somehow behave in ways similar to that of the donor. And finally, there must be some scientific evidence for the proposed non-localized influence or 'remote control' of the heart over the brain and body.

Concerning the first issue, Pearce relies on the authority of the heart surgeon who pioneered in heart transplantation, Christian Barnard, who said: "We must give up the idea of an artificial heart, since we have found the organ to be far more than just a pumping station."¹²

As for the second point, Pearce confirms that though the heart is governed by a 'higher' order of energy (or a 'soul' in Islamic belief), the behavior of "people getting heart-transplants often dramatically reflect certain behaviours of the late donors."¹³ And regarding the possibility of non-localization, he refers the reader to convincing experiments in which two cells taken from the heart are observed through a microscope. In the first experiment in which they are isolated from one another, they simply fibrillate until they die. However, when similar cells are brought near to each other, they synchronize and beat in unison:

They don't have to touch; they communicate across a spatial barrier...Our heart, made up of many billions of such cells operating in unison, is under the guidance of a higher, non-localised intelligence...

So we have both a physical heart and a higher ‘universal heart’ and our access to the latter is...dramatically contingent on the...former.¹⁴

According to Pearce, when we are in deep spiritual contemplation, we are drawing from our spiritual universal heart, which influences our physical heart, that communicates with our brain and influences our cognitive activities. This, in some respects, is very similar to the views of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in his monumental work *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences) in which he clearly states that although the spiritual heart (*qalb*), which is the controlling centre of the soul, is different from the physical human heart, its functioning is related and directed by it. We can thus see how a biological discourse develops into a religious dialogue.¹⁵

However, as Uttal argues, despite all the recent achievements in science and technology, we are still ignorant of the way the nervous system provides human beings with their consciousness and their sense of being, which are their dearest possessions. This, I believe, is really a matter for contemplation and meditation about the creation and about the essence of contemplation itself, and in all its psychological, spiritual and behavioral aspects. These questions are expressed succinctly by the Sudanese poet, Yūsuf Bashīr al-Tijānī, who addresses the mind in his poem ‘Prophets of Truth’:

Lord, grant me Your grace, how moulded
 Your Hand the hidden, mysterious talisman
 Called mind, by You in eternity?
 Who planned and directed life?
 Lord, grant me Your grace: this mind,
 Who stopped it from being visible to us?
 Its being, hidden from itself, has it
 Become accident in time, or remained an essence?
 O mind, O delusion of the mind,
 Do you not have a better claim to yourself?
 O powers that demolish and build up life,
 And can turn the world into ashes and dust.¹⁶

LANGUAGE: THE MAIN VEHICLE OF CONTEMPLATION

Despite the complexity of this problem, research in cognitive psychology has become familiar with many secrets of human internal intellectual and mental activities and their precise relation with language. With the help of modern computer scientists, it has been possible to set up simplified programs to clarify some of the methods followed by the human mind in classifying information. It has been found, for instance, that language is not only a human being's means of address and communication, but also the basic system used in thinking. Without the laws that control the way in which tangible and abstract meanings are conveyed through word symbols, human beings cannot develop abstract concepts. They cannot use either their sensory perception or their ability to imagine and remember in dealing with various types of experiences they underwent in the past, so that they can relate them to the present and deduce from them possible solutions to problems they are facing. Thinking, in fact, is using such symbols through cognitive processes.

Some researchers, like Whorf who formulated the 'linguistic relativity' hypothesis, consider the characteristics of the language spoken by a certain group of people to be the factor that denoted how they think and how they visualize the realities they live. The structure and other aspects of language are therefore considered to be basic factors in the way a given society visualizes the world.

Let us take a closer look at this idea of the importance of language. If it were wholly or even partly true, it would be most appropriate for us to consider the characteristics of the Arabic language, its impact on the Arabs and the reasons for the divine choice of this language as the means to reveal the Qur'an and convey the message of Islam to the whole of humanity. God says in the Qur'an: "We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and we will assuredly guard it" (15:9). This means that He guards Revelation and, consequently, also the Arabic language. In this connection, the Egyptian scholar, ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād, discusses some aspects of the Arabic language: its vocabulary, phonetic and phonemic aspects:

The human speech system is a superb musical instrument which no ancient or modern nation has used as perfectly as the Arab nation, as they have used the entire phonetic range in the distribution of its alphabet. Therefore, it is these qualities of the Arabic language that made Arabic poetry a perfect art, independent of other arts.¹⁷

According to al-‘Aqqād, these qualities are not found in any other language, for “Arabic eloquence has taken the human speech organs to the highest point ever reached by man in expressing himself by letters and words.”¹⁸

In *Al-Fuṣḥā: Luḡhat al-Qur’ān* (Classical Arabic: The Language of the Qur’an), Anwar al-Jundī mentions the qualities of the Arabic language and its importance in propagating Islam:

It is most astonishing to see this robust language (Arabic) growing and reaching a stage of perfection in the midst of the desert, and in a nation of nomads. The language has superseded other languages by its wealth of vocabulary, precise meanings and perfect structure. This language was unknown to other nations. But when it came to be known, it appeared to us in such perfection that it hardly underwent any change ever since. Of the stages of life, that language had neither childhood nor old age. We hardly know anything about that language beyond its unmatched conquests and victories. We cannot find any similar language that appeared to scholars so complete, and without gradation, keeping a structure so pure and flawless. The spread of the Arabic language covered the largest areas and remotest countries.¹⁹

FROM COGNITIVE ACTIVITY TO ESTABLISHED NORMAL AND ABNORMAL HABITS

After this digression about the importance of language as a basic system for thinking, we turn to the research of cognitive psychologists and computer scientists in their attempts to understand human internal cognitive activities. Both are concerned with the study of the human capacity to analyze, classify and store information in the memory so as to retrieve it when needed. They have conducted many

detailed studies to examine the processes used by a human being in thinking and problem-solving then, using this data, they have established various programs imitating human cognitive activity. Some have even created a program that tries to imitate the way of thinking of neurotics and psychotics in their adjustment to their environment. These studies have clarified many aspects that the behaviorists had chosen to ignore because they felt it was impossible to identify its contents, and have produced many theories and explanations that challenge the naïve concept of stimulus-response psychology. These studies have also opened a window for the Muslim psychologist to learn more about the importance of contemplation and worship, and the concomitant internal mental-cognitive activity associated with them. Psychotherapists and personality psychologists have made use of these cognitive studies that disclose human internal thinking and feelings and examine the formation of observable normal and abnormal human behavior.

As we have mentioned earlier, the behaviorists emphasize the role of the environment as the only influence responsible for the development of the human personality and normal and abnormal human behavior. This is to say, they believe that environmental stimuli directly lead to the behavioral responses. The cognitive psychologists, on the other hand, are more concerned with the meanings produced by these experiences. They claim that an experience does not automatically provoke a response, except in the case of reflexes – like pulling the hand away when it touches a hot surface. Complex responses that influence people's ideas, beliefs, voluntary decisions and observable complex behavior come from previous conceptualizations, emotions and experiences which give meaning to subsequent environmental stimuli. In other words, it is what people think about that affects their beliefs, feelings and consequent behavior. If their thinking is centered on the creation and bounties of the Almighty, their faith will increase and their deeds and behavior will improve; if it is centered on their pleasures and desires, they will be distracted from their religion and their behavior will degenerate; and if their thinking is about their fears, frustrations, failures and consequent pessimism, they will be afflicted with reactive depression and other psychological disorders. Consequently, cognitive

psychologists concentrate their therapy on changing patients' conscious thinking as it is the activity that usually precedes the feelings and emotional responses of normal and neurotic people. In other words, they try to change the 'software' used by their minds, as it is the program they use which gives meaning to what they experience. This internal cognitive activity (automatic thoughts) may be so rapid and spontaneous that the individual does not notice it except after thorough analysis and training.

This research has shown that every intentional action performed by the individual is preceded by an internal cognitive activity. They have also proved that the human mind never stops this cognitive activity at any moment of the day or night, whether the individual is aware of it or not. A classic illustration of this is when someone is unable to find a solution to a problem, so puts it aside and moves on to a different activity; then, suddenly, the solution comes to mind without a conscious effort by that person or any expectation. A famous example of this is Archimedes' sudden discovery of the fluid displacement law. Similarly, someone who fails to remember a name or a word will suddenly remember it some time later.

Therefore, it is the internal cognitive activity of a human being, whether conscious or unconscious, that directs observable human behavior. This conclusion was reached by cognitive psychologists after long years of research, overstepping all the psychological schools that tried to confine complex human general behavior into simplistic theories. Furthermore, this cognitive perspective clearly supports what Islam had already established: that contemplation, as an internal thought process, is the backbone of faith which is the source of every good deed.

In addition to this discovery that every action begins with an internal cognitive activity – be it a notion, a memory, an image, a perception, or an emotion – it has also been shown that when this cognitive activity gains strength, it can become a motive or an incentive for action; and if the individual performs this motivated action repeatedly, then these internal ideas can easily and spontaneously make it become a rooted habit. This habit is not necessarily a skill; it can be an emotion, a spiritual feeling, or an attitude. So, if the cognitive therapist wishes to treat a

patient who suffers from an emotional or other kind of habit, he must strive to change the internal thinking that causes this behavior. If the habit is fear of social situations, for instance, the therapist has to identify the negative thinking that causes the patient to respond with this social fear. For example, if the patient imagines that he would look silly if he were to talk or introduce himself to strangers, or if he were to deliver a speech before a group of acquaintances, the therapist can then help the patient change these negative thoughts by showing that they are irrational, have no basis in reality, and that the patient's feelings blindly followed his pessimistic thinking until he was wrongly convinced by them to the extent that they took control of his behavior. When these internal notions are changed, the behavior will change accordingly.

This kind of therapy can also be performed by stimulating responses that are contrary to the negative ideas, fancies, and internal emotions that cause the habit. In the case of fear of social situations, for instance, the therapist can stimulate in the patient a relaxing feeling of security and psychological comfort, while at the same time exposing him to increasingly difficult social situations (whether real or imaginary).

On the other hand, if the negative habit causes the patient some pleasure and psychological comfort, such as gambling, drinking alcohol or performing certain deviant sexual behavior, the treatment by countermeasures leads the therapist to stimulate a sense of pain, psychological stress and fear in the patient when he repeats that particular negative habit. In this type of aversion therapy, an alcoholic or drug addict, for instance, is given injections of a chemical material that will cause him to have nausea and headaches when he drinks alcohol; he may even be exposed to painful but harmless electric shocks. This 'reward and punishment' therapy is known as 'reciprocal inhibition' and is one of the most successful techniques of modern behavioral therapy. Though devised by behaviorists, the cognitive therapists have developed it by relating it to the thinking and the conscious feelings of the patient. This marriage of aspects of behavior modification with the recent developments in cognitive therapy is the latest and most successful innovation in psychological therapy.

Cognitive psychology, therefore, affirms that people's conscious thinking and inner dialogues influence their feelings and emotions, and form their attitudes and beliefs – in short, they can even shape their values and vision of life. If the discussion is transferred from the cognitive therapy of the emotionally disturbed to the cognitive activity of normal Muslims, one can clearly see the great influence of the cognitive processes involved in contemplation in remodeling the very psyche of individuals. Furthermore, if the spritual/faith factor is added – a factor which is a powerful cognitive force totally excluded by modern psychology – one can imagine the momentous change that Islamic contemplation can achieve in purifying the souls and elevating the status of the worshippers. Through contemplation, Muslims can refine their own internal 'reward and punishment' psychospiritual strategies in their spiritual development; they do not need a worldly reward or an electric shock to change their unwanted habits and replace them with more worthy ones. By devoting their internal cognitive and spiritual aspirations to the contemplation of God's majesty and perfection in contrast to their laxity and unworthy behavior, they will certainly develop the sentiment of love of God and the refined feelings of contentment, happiness and tranquillity. This will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.