

THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

Contemporary Knowledge and the Muslim World

Insight into the Professorial Inaugural Lecture of
Prof. Dr. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud
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Prof. Dr. Alparslan AÇIKGENÇ
YILDIZ TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY
ISTANBUL

Higher education institutions are perceived by most of the public including the Muslim world as the place where people can get a qualification to find a job. This is not totally wrong because the modern university has turned into such an institution. However, scholars constantly assign new roles to the higher institutions of learning; help keep world peace, develop knowledge based economy, sustainable development, dealing with problems of ignorance and how to make education accessible globally and so on. Professor Wan Mohd Nor has taken this issue from a global perspective and brought it to relevance with the Muslim world; he is thus trying to deal with an issue that suggests solutions to the problems of Muslim world at a high level of knowledge which is supposed to be generated at the university. Such knowledge is not information but, in the words of Professor al-Attas, a comprehensive vision of reality and truth that represents the Islamic worldview. This comprehensive vision of reality and truth is possible today with a balanced and sensitive approach to the present-day knowledge the result of which is what we have been calling “Islamization of the present-day knowledge”.

As this idea represents a comprehensive new project to deal with ignorance which requires a high level of knowledge and insight into the present-day issues and problems, it is extremely complicated and delicate at the same time. For this reason we see Professor Wan introducing many issues under his discussion; but the most important outcome of this is a sophisticated Islamic philosophy of education

which the Muslim world direly needs today. The main issues brought under review within this presentation can be summarized under six headings:

1. Individual cultural identity; more particularly of Muslims;
2. Collective cultural identity of more particularly Muslims and the state of the present Islamic civilization;
3. The role of knowledge in human identity which manifests layers;
4. The role of a specific kind of knowledge in Muslim identity;
5. Islamization of the present-day knowledge, and finally;
6. The role and strategic significance of the university to deal with these issues.

We may add quite a long list of ideas and doctrines given in defense of the solutions offered for these issues. Since we are concerned with the university as the main focus of our attention, the concept of education becomes of paramount importance for this discussion. That is why he has pointed out that “Educational system should reflect the worldview of the society and culture.” Against the background of these issues and solutions offered Professor Wan has given us the outline of a profound Islamic philosophy of education. I will now try to put this philosophy of education within the context of its epistemology without which no philosophy of education is possible. As I present the epistemology of Islamic philosophy of education I shall return to the main issues brought up by Professor Wan Mohd Nor with a global perspective.

As we all know education is mainly a learning process. It is possible to analyze this process **internally** and **externally**. **Internal** process represents the basic elements of education that are internal to those who are being educated. **External** process directly related to education but external to those who are being educated. Both the internal and external processes of learning are either **Natural** or **Systematic**. Let me know try to explain these.

I. INTERNAL PROCESS OF LEARNING

As pointed out this is either **Natural Internal Process of Learning** or **Systematic Internal Process of Learning**.

A. Natural Internal Process of Learning

This process is carried out by our knowledge system while we are engaged in a learning activity. It resembles our digestive system which has internal and external processes, both of which also have “natural” and “systematic” ways, although they may not be called as such in anatomy. The former is the process which takes place after the food is put into the mouth; and the latter is the process which takes place during the gathering and preparing the food before it is eaten. **Hence, the internal process of digestion is like the internal process of learning, which is in fact, “acquiring knowledge”, namely the process that takes place after the “information” received from the objects of knowledge and transferred to the *mind*.** The external process of digestion is a good illustration to the external process of learning or of acquiring knowledge, namely the process that takes place before the “information” is received from the objects of knowledge and then again transferred into the *mind*.

When we acquire knowledge in this way a structure of knowledge is formed in our mind. The first structure which arises in our mind after we are born may be called “**Life Structure**”.

However, we need a definition of a **structure** beforehand:

**A STRUCTURE IN OUR MIND IS THE UNITY OF CONCEPTS
IN SUCH A WAY THAT THEY REPRESENT AN OUTLOOK.**

We may explain this taking the Life Structure as an example: **Life Structure** in our mind is such a coherent mental unity which makes up the total contents of our mind in our earliest life onwards enriching itself until adulthood according to the natural rules and principles of the mind through its social and physical

surrounding. As such it is primarily related to our biological and daily life. In that case Life Structure in our mind includes most of our daily habits related to the preservation of our life. We can conclude from this that:

THE CONTENTS OF OUR MIND FORMS A UNITY OF CONCEPTS CONNECTED TO EACH OTHER IN SUCH A WAY THAT TOGETHER THEY ALL FORM A COMPREHENSIVE STRUCTURE IN OUR MIND REPRESENTING A GENERAL OUTLOOK, which we call “WORLDVIEW”.

All the structures in our mind form a coherent cluster of concepts in our worldview which become the very foundation of our conduct in life.

B. Systematic Internal Process of Learning

As the Life Structure becomes more sophisticated our experience becomes more conceptual. These conceptual structures act as “**MENTALITIES**”. When each mentality develops into clearly distinguishable structures, they separate from the Life Structure and form another structure in the mind. This can happen only through education and that is why we think that **EDUCATION is primarily a systematic internal process of learning in the epistemological sense.**

When we acquire knowledge in this way a structure of knowledge is formed in our mind after the Life Structure. I would like to call this

WORLD STRUCTURE

In this way more structures may be formed in our worldview. But the most fundamental ones including the previous ones are five:

- 1. Life Structure**
- 2. World Structure**
- 3. Knowledge Structure**
- 4. Value Structure**
- 5. Human Structure**

All the structures of a worldview operate in relation to each other as a unity.

Let us consider Professor al-Attas’s definition of Islamization once more:

Islamization is the liberation of man first from magical, mythological, animistic, national-cultural tradition opposed to Islam, and then from secular control over his reason and his language. The man of Islam is he whose reason and language are no longer controlled by magic, mythology, animism, his own national and cultural traditions opposed to Islam and secularism. He is liberated from both the magical and the secular world views. We have defined the nature of islamization as a liberating process. It is liberating because since man is both physical being and spirit, the liberation refers to his spirit, for man as such is the real man to whom all conscious and significant actions ultimately refer...Islamization is a process not so much of *evolution* as that of *devolution* to original nature; man as spirit is already perfect, but man as such when actualized as physical being is subject to forgetfulness and ignorance and injustice to himself and hence is not necessarily perfect...We have also defined islamization as involving first the islamization of language, and this fact was demonstrated by the Holy Qur'an itself when it was first revealed among the Arabs.¹

This all-pervasive definition holds Islamization as primarily a process that aims at transforming the individual from one state of mind to the Islamic state of mind. This is then the purpose of Islamic education which involves a total process of transformation from the state of the colonized mind by contemporary western knowledge to the state (*hâl*) of Islam. This state is expressed as “mentality” in the epistemological sense, referring the one who is “*’ârif*”; but “*taqwâ*” in the ontological sense; “*khalîfa*” in the cosmological sense; “*insan kâmil*” in the moral sense, and so on.

As we have seen the internal processes concerning education are primarily epistemological. Whenever we say “epistemology” we mean the scientific explanation of the way we acquire knowledge. As we defined education as a process of acquiring knowledge then this discussion has shown how education is possible scientifically. But now we need to see what is going on around the student while he is undergoing education and this represents the external processes.

II. EXTERNAL PROCESS OF LEARNING

Again this is either **Natural External Process of Learning** or

¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), 1978), 41-2; see the ISTAC edition (1993), 44-5.

Systematic External Process of Learning.

A. Natural External Process of Learning

The natural process of learning or of acquiring knowledge is the personal trial of an individual in acquiring knowledge. Usually this is the way we first begin to learn things when we arrive to this world but it continues after even we begin to learn systematically through our regular school education. Everyone can develop his/her own method for this kind of learning but in any case the main method of natural learning is trial and error. Because of this individual character of natural learning no educational theory can be established for it. The actual education begins when systematic learning and/or schooling starts in a scientific way and we shall now examine this.

B. Systematic External Process of Learning

THIS PROCESS REPRESENTS EDUCATION

We thus reach also a definition of education:

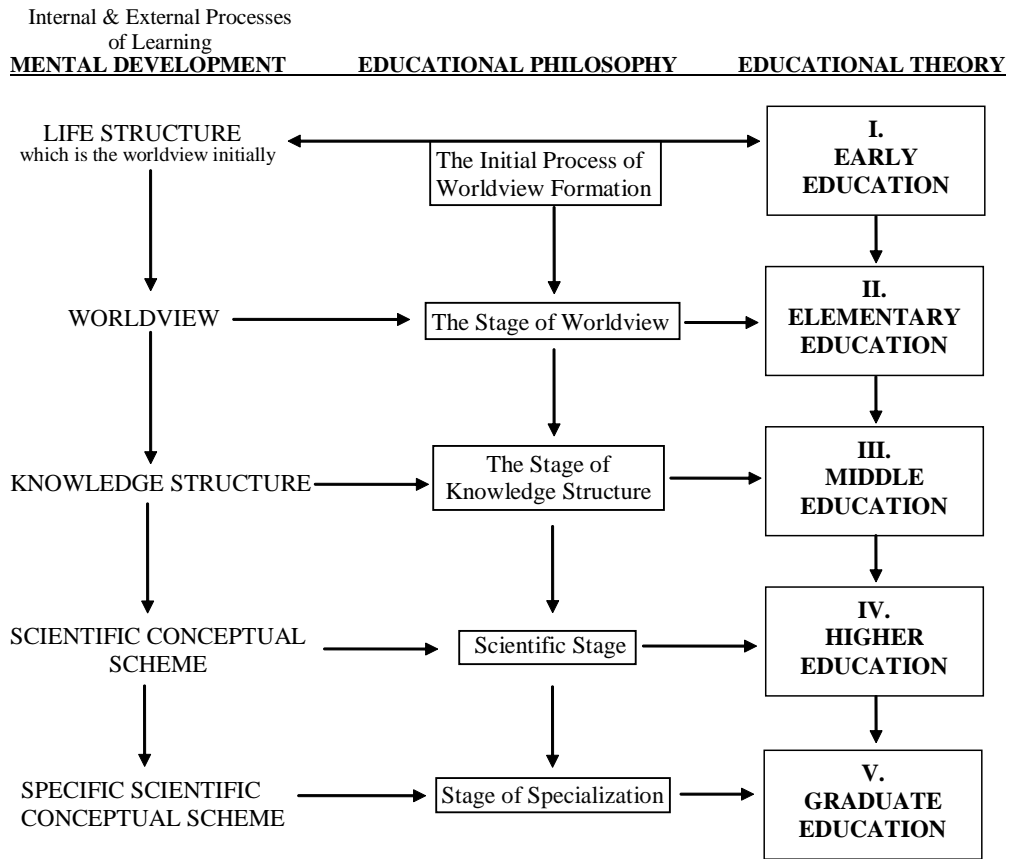
“Education as a discipline is Systematic External Process of Learning”

Therefore, we need to develop a philosophy of education and in turn our theory of education to larger extent on the basis of the Systematic External Process. It is in this context that Professor Wan’s exposition becomes critical for Muslims today, because he has brought this process into its background which shows what are supposed to take place in the soul and personality of the individual undergoing education.

WE NEED TO SHOW HOW THIS TAKES PLACE?

The Internal and External Processes of Learning are parallel to each other. In that case their Natural and Systematic Processes must also be parallel. This leads us

to



conclude that parallel to the development of the structures in our worldview there will be corresponding *Elements* in both our philosophy and theory of education. Let us see these corresponding *Elements* on a table

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE UNIVERSITY

Although the educational system starts from the root process going to higher education Professor Wan has effectively shown that its establishment starts from higher education at the advanced level within the context of the university. This is because without developing the proper framework of the mind for the lower levels it is not possible to establish the elementary and middle education. But these frameworks of the mind are developed at the scientific level at the university. In that case the establishment of Islamic educational system must begin at the university. This is possible only by an effective philosophy of education. What is then our philosophy of education?

First of all, we need to identify the purpose of education:

Adab in the Islamic sense

- An educated man is a good man;
- A good man means a man possessing *adab* in its full inclusive sense.

Therefore, a man of *adab* (*insan adabi*) is “the one who is sincerely conscious of his responsibilities towards the true God; who understands and fulfills his obligations to himself and others in his society with justice, and who constantly strives to improve every aspect of himself towards perfection as a man of”.

We now see the definition of education with respect to its purpose as an external process of learning:

Education, is thus *ta'dib*: the instilling and inculcation of *adab* in man.

Second we need to identify the method of education in our philosophy of education: Here is Professor Wan's response:

- *adab* is to be conceptually fused with right knowledge (*'ilm*) and proper and sincere action (*'amal*)

Since these are to be reflected in Islamic worldview this involves “the intelligent emulation of the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (a.s.m). This leads to the definition of *adab* as provided by Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas:

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.

This definition necessarily brings the student to other key terms in the Islamic worldview, such as wisdom (*hikmah*) and justice (*'adl*), and reality and truth (*haqq*). Reality and truth (*haqq*) are defined as both the correspondence and coherence with the right and proper place. Therefore the actual home of Islamic philosophy of education is the Islamic worldview.

This brings in the various applications of *adab* cited as:

Adab towards God;

Adab towards knowledge;

Adab towards natural world;

Adab towards spiritual world

This brings in mind that the right term or concept of education in the Islamic sense is *ta'dib*. (remembering the hadîth: *addabanî rabbî fa absana tadîbî*)

When we bring this moral dimension to the center of the university then we say that a **man of *adab* is a Universal Man**, authoritative in several fields. For this reason, Islamic higher educational institutions based on this philosophy of education will offer broad-based, and not narrow, specialized programs.

Now we turn to the Internal and External Processes of Learning there are also Internal and External challenges facing the university today in the Muslim world:

1. The Internal Challenges

The attitude dominating the internal challenges is the discrete approach, which is taking the higher education as a separate entity from the early education and not considering it as an integral and complimentary to it.

The Discrete Approach leads to two more misunderstanding:

The first one is the usual practice which sees the university as an institution of teaching and thus only scientific knowledge is conveyed to the student but scientific attitude is not taught. Scientific attitude is a *skill* which is hard to acquire. As such it represents the scientific mentality in Islamic scientific tradition.

The second one is seeing the university as an institution of teaching and thus it is believed that the aim of the university is primarily to teach the student contemporary scientific knowledge. This eventually leads to arrange the university not according to an educational philosophy and a theory. As a result no thinker attempts to develop such a theory. We must understand that *theory* is the plan of an achievement. **That is why the proposed Islamic philosophy of education by Professor Wan is of paramount importance.**

The result of contemporary university: The university is no longer seen a part of the general education but rather the training sanctuary for either practitioners of science or for those who seek to get a job for livelihood.

As a result of this wrong understanding most students come to the university not to acquire the scientific mentality of the age. They rather come with a wrong attitude thinking that they need to acquire the contemporary scientific knowledge. Above all most students think that acquiring this knowledge will give them a better chance to get a good job.

They fail to think about how to be more successful after getting the job.

2. The External Challenges

These are the challenges that are not included within the educational theory but vital for it. There are many such challenges which are skillfully elaborated by Professor Wan but the following may be enumerated as fundamental:

- Moral Attitude;
- Intellectual Dynamism;
- Social Conditions;
- Political and Legal Environment;
- Economic Conditions.

These challenges I believe posit a fundamental trend for the higher education which can be expressed as: **scientific attitude imbedded in the Islamic view of the university which is the most indispensable trend to be recovered today in the Muslim world for the institutions of higher learning.**