

## LEARNING AND PERCEPTION IN AL-TIRMIDHĪ'S PSYCHOLOGY

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### *Introduction*

Learning is the most important means of developing human intellectual potentiality. It is through learning that man can come to know the unknown and be transformed from the state of ignorance to that of knowledge. In Islam, learning occupies a very significant position. In fact the very first revelation which the Prophet (peace be upon him) received was concerned with learning.<sup>1</sup> In Western as well as Islamic psychology learning and perception are looked upon as two important subjects. Both learning and perception are attained through knowledge. This article will discuss these two subjects as conceptualized by al-Tirmidhī, a prominent Muslim scholar who lived in the third/tenth century.<sup>2</sup>

Robert S. Feldman in his book *Understanding Psychology*, defines learning as "a relatively permanent change in behaviour brought about by experience."<sup>3</sup> This definition implies that any behaviour changes that are due to maturation or to temporary conditions of the organism are excluded from learning. Since learning deals with 'behaviour' which is a generic term covering any measurable response of an organism, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Al-'Alaq, 96:1-5.

<sup>2</sup> For his complete biography, see Dr. Muhammad Ibraheem al-Geyoushī, "Al-Hakīm al-Tirmidhī: His Works and Thoughts," *The Islamic Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1970); Hasan Qasim, "The Life and Works of al-Hakīm al-Tirmidhī," *Hamdard Islamicus* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1979); and Bernd Radtke, *The Concept of Sainthood in the Early Islamic Mysticism* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Robert S. Feldman, *Understanding Psychology* (New York: Mc Graw Hill, 1987), 183.

therefore a very vast subject, too vast to be scrutinized. It involves not only the acquisition of knowledge, emotional habits, social interaction, and personality development, but also the mastering of new skills. In short, learning pervades all aspects of our life from birth to death.

In this study, however, our intention is not to discuss all aspects of learning, but to limit ourselves to the process of the acquisition of knowledge as expounded by al-Tirmidhī.

### *Learning: Knowledge and Its Acquisition*

According to al-Tirmidhī, knowledge is of two kinds: knowledge which is given (*'ilm wahbī*) and acquired knowledge (*'ilm iktisābī*).<sup>4</sup> The former is inspired by God, while the latter is acquired through ordinary means. This classification of knowledge is in fact inspired by a ḥadīth of the Prophet (peace be upon him) that, "Knowledge is of two kinds; the first is the knowledge of the tongue, and it is the proof of God to His creation; the second is the knowledge of the heart and it is 'the useful'."<sup>5</sup>

It seems from the writings of al-Tirmidhī that he believed that the knowledge of the tongue here referred to acquired knowledge while the knowledge of the heart referred to inspired knowledge. Al-Tirmidhī, in almost all his writings, preferred the term *'ilm bāṭin* (esoteric knowledge) and *'ilm zāhir* (exoteric knowledge) to other terms. Esoteric knowledge was described by him both as "the useful" as well as the "knowledge of reality" (*al-ḥaqīqah*), while exoteric knowledge was described as knowledge

<sup>4</sup> Hasan al-Sharqāwī, *Min Ḥukamā' al-Ummah* (Iskandariyyah: Dār al-Ma'rifah al-Jāmi'iyyah, 1990), 22.

<sup>5</sup> This ḥadīth is quoted from al-Tirmidhī's *Bayān al-Farq bayn al-Ṣadr wa al-Qalb wa al-Fu'ād wa al-Lubb*, ed. Nicholas Heer (Cairo: Dār al-'Arab, n.d.), 49, hereafter cited as *Bayān*. It is also found in al-Muttaqī, *Kanz al-'Ummāl fī Sunan al-Aqwāl wa al-Af'āl*, 6 vols (Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1993), 5: 4050.