



## Avicenna's View on the Role of Practical Intellect in Performing Moral Action

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### Abstract

In Avicenna's view, the practical intellect plays a basic and foundational role in producing moral action. By investigating this notion in the framework of Avicenna's philosophy, we find that he regards perception and cognition as the main functions of the practical intellect. However, he considers this perception as particular, introducing it as different from the particularity of imaginary and estimative cognitions (animal perceptive faculties). This difference makes the action produced by an animal essentially different from the action produced by the practical intellect. This view, however, is contrary to the views of some other philosophers and theologians who disagree with him on the perceptive function of the practical intellect and maintain just a motivational function for it. In addition, Avicenna enumerates the following as other roles of the practical intellect in producing moral action: motivational and incentive function; dominance over motivational and inclinative (to or against) faculties, etc and being served by them; serving the speculative intellect and purifying, completing and refining the speculative intellect in the realm of the practical intellect. Many other points have also been mentioned in this regard within this article. Overall, the central role of the practical intellect in producing moral action in Avicenna's view gives rise to other discussions regarding moral action as well, in a way that those discussions are based on, or lead to it directly or indirectly.



### Keywords

producing action, moral action, practical intellect, universal cognition, particular cognition, practical cognition, Avicenna.

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## Introduction

From the etymological and semantic point of view, *Aql* (intellect) means perisher and blood money (Ibn Athir, vol. 3, p. 278), protection (Ibn Manzur, vol. 11, p. 458), interdiction and prohibition (Hosseini Zabidi, vol. 15, p. 504), which mostly possess a negative aspect. In general, the literal meaning of *Aql* is “prohibition”, for it prohibits its owner from going astray (Azdi, vol. 3, p. 916). In a terminological sense, *Aql* is a natural faculty through which knowledge is acquired and understood. By enumerating eight meanings for *Aql* and stating the semantic differences among them as well as the notions such as *‘Ilm* (knowledge) which may be confused with *Aql*, Avicenna explains that the speculative intellect is a faculty of the soul that accepts the quiddities of general affairs in the sense that they are general, and the practical intellect is a faculty of the soul through which the motivational faculty is incited to move towards those particular affairs that have been selected for achieving an imagined or known goal (Avicenna, 1400 AH, p. 88). As you can see, although he refers to the acceptance of the essence of things regarding the quiddity of the intellect, and stresses on the practical passive mode; however, he emphasizes the element of incitement to action concerning the practical intellect. This very change in position shows that unlike the speculative intellect, the conceptual components of the practical intellect are not analytically agreed upon. According to the analysis of some contemporary researchers, this conflict of statements regarding the limitation of the practical intellect rises from the difference in their understanding and interpretation of Farabi and Avicenna’s words in defining the practical intellect (Sadr, 1383 AP, p. 33).

While emphasizing this fact, Gazali points to the fact that naming the practical intellect as *Aql* is due to verbal equivocality, as the practical intellect lacks any perception and is effective only in inciting to action; and it is called intellect because it causes motion subject to the (speculative) intellect (Gazali, 1961, p. 359). Therefore, it must be said that there is no single opinion in defining the practical intellect; indeed, numerous important elements may enter this definition, which are dealt with in the following sections.

At the outset of studying the definition and essence of the practical intellect, we must clarify what potentials the practical intellect possesses and what effects and functions we can envision for it. It seems that there is no disagreement in the incitive potential of the practical intellect, although different analyses have been presented on the mode of playing that role. Regarding the cognitive and perceptive potential of the practical intellect, however, there is a deeply rooted disagreement; the bases and reasons of which are interesting to study.

Another element that contributes to this discussion is that if one assumes a perceptive role for the practical intellect, what relationship do the objects of speculative and practical intellect have with one another and essentially, to what categories do they belong? And in the same vein, what is the relationship between the speculative and practical intellect? Does viewing the way that the speculative intellect employs the practical intellect to produce action adequately cover all the potentials of the practical intellect? And another very important key point is the question of the genus of the intelligible of the practical intellect; and whether the practical intellect understands universal or particular concepts and in either of the two cases, is it compatible with the vast Islamic Philosophy system, Peripatetic philosophy and particularly Avicenna's view regarding knowledge?

## **1. The Cognitive Roles of the Practical Intellect**

### **1.1. The Practical Intellect and the Potential of Cognition**

No doubt the potential of perception and cognition for the practical intellect plays a fundamental role in explaining the essence of the practical intellect. In response to the question of whether the practical intellect has a perception specific to itself or not, philosophers are divided into the following two general groups:

a. While quoting Aristotle's analysis of speculative and practical faculties, Farabi indicates that the practical intellect is the faculty whose potential is cognitive access to those existents that man can create; albeit after he reasons about the benefit of their actualization. According to Farabi, the speculative intellect is the faculty that has access to the intelligible which is not creatable (Aal Yasin, 1405 AH, p. 370). It is clear, therefore, that Farabi and Aristotle believe in the perceptive potential of the practical intellect. Although, whether this perceptive potential belongs to the universals-understanding intellect or not, and whether the object of perception is the intelligible or not, will be discussed later. He also indicates in *al-Fusul al-Muntazi'ah* that the practical intellect can perceive what merits selection or avoidance (Farabi, 1364 AP, pp. 54 & 64).

Similarly, in this same philosophical tradition, Avicenna considers deriving that which must necessarily be performed as the action of the faculty of the practical intellect (Avicenna, 1375 AP, vol. 2, p. 353). In *Nijat*, he quotes the 'First Teacher' (Aristotle) and refers to the term "particular intelligible" for the practical intellect, which, compared to the "universal judgment" of the speculative intellect, shows his belief in the perceptive

potential of the practical intellect (Avicenna, 1379 AP, p. 581). Although Khwaja Nasir al-Din Tusi has been unable to explain this expression well and considers the perception of *dos* as a potential of the practical intellect; however, he regards its universality to be related to the speculative intellect and discusses the assistance of the practical and speculative intellects in obtaining this rational view and judgment. But ultimately, he considers epistemic access to particular judgment to be one of the potentials of the practical intellect (Avicenna, 1375 AP, Vol. 2, p. 354).

b. Mulla Qutb's analysis is, however, in contrast to this view. His argument is as follows: producing an action without knowledge is impossible. Perceiving universal premises for action, such as universal moral rules and perceiving what merits performance in general, is among the potentialities of the speculative intellect. However, it is not possible to produce a particular action through universal knowledge and therefore, universal rules must be transformed into particular perceptions. He attributes the particular perception of morality to the speculative intellect as well and ultimately, while denying the perceptive potential of the practical intellect, also regards the status of the practical intellect to be particular perception derived from the speculative intellect (Avicenna, 1375 AP, vol. 4, p. 353). Similarly, Gazali negates the perception of the practical intellect and while asserting that naming the practical intellect as *Aql* is not because it encompasses perception or findings but because of verbal equivocality, he acknowledges that the only potential of the practical intellect is "motion", however, since its object is rational it is called *Aql* (Gazali, 1961, p. 359). Khwaja mentions something similar to this claim regarding equivocality (Avicenna, 1375 AP, Vol. 2, p. 353).

In opposition to this claim, some scholars have refuted the view that the practical intellect is called intellect because of its relation to the intelligible, and believe that the difference between the perceptions of the practical and speculative intellect is the only point of their distinction, and the common point between them is rational perception; they assert that the meaning of a judgment by the practical intellect regarding the necessity of something refers to the perception of its necessity, not deriving a law (Muzaffar, vol. 1, 1383, p. 221). This very emphasis is found in the works of other authors as well who, regarding the definition that the speculative intellect perceives reality, and the practical intellect perceives what deserves to take place, believe that it is better if we modify the statement as the practical intellect also perceives reality, however, that reality is broader than existence, and good and evil too are two fixed facts in reality. The difference between these two is that if that which is perceived by the intellect does not lead to action, it is a speculative perception

and if it does, it is practical perception (Sadr, vol. 4, p. 120).

In this regard, Mulla Sadra starts the discussion from the speculative and practical faculties of the soul. He believes that true and false belong to the speculative faculty, and good and evil to the practical faculty. Similarly, necessary, contingent and impossible belong to the former, and pretty, ugly and what falls between them belongs to the latter. He asserts that as both practical and speculative intellects experience strength and weakness in their actions, they both are epistemological perceptions and accesses (Mulla Sadra, 1360 AP, p. 201). This view follows from Avicenna's view, who asserts all that Mulla Sadra indicates, and also adds that both speculative and practical intellects may arrive at an opinion or supposition. An opinion is a decisive belief, and a supposition is what belief is inclined to, even while the opposite is also rationally permissible (Avicenna, 1405 AH, p. 185). By adding the adverb, *fi 'aqliha* (in its intellection), in *Mabda' wa Ma'aad*, Mulla Sadra more explicitly emphasizes the perception of the practical intellect (Mulla Sadra, 1368 AP, p. 839).

One can conclude that while most Islamic philosophers maintain that the practical intellect has the potential of perception, Gazali and Mulla Qutb attribute all types of cognition to the speculative intellect. The Shi'ite scholars of Principles of Jurisprudence are also more inclined to the former group.

## 1.2. The Role of the Practical Intellect in Creating Universal-Particular Cognition in Comparison to the Speculative Intellect

Considering the aforementioned explanations, one can find some sort of cognitivism regarding the discussion of the practical intellect among most philosophers of Islamic Ethics; especially Avicenna. As a result, they believe in a special cognitive function for the practical intellect. Most of these groups also believe that realities are the objects of the practical intellect; however, there are many conflicts among scholars concerning the way they occur – something that is out of the main subject of the present article.

Supposing that the practical intellect has a perceptive potential, the question can be raised as to whether that which is perceived by this intellect is universal or particular? In his treatise entitled *Ahwal-i Nafs* (the states of the soul), Avicenna first deals with the definition of the soul and while studying its faculties, he also deals with the various potentials related to it in numerous chapters. He then refers to the topic of prophet-hood by presenting the premise of the practical intellect's move towards actualization and asserts that man's perceived images are acquired through the speculative intellect if they are universal and through the practical intellect if they are

particular. Both speculative and practical intellects are of the superior substances, but they also have some differences discussed in the next section (Avicenna, 2007, p. 117).

The criterion of division according to Avicenna in his *Isharat* is different from that which is stated in *Ahwal-i Nafs*. In *Isharat*, Avicenna starts from the faculties of the rational soul (*Nafs-i Natiqa*) as follows: if the faculties of the soul are for managing the body, they belong to the practical intellect, and their duty is to derive matters related to actions; this, however, is only in the case of particular (not universal) matters because voluntary intentions are not acquired through universal knowledge, and it is the particulars-understanding intellect with the aid of the universals-understanding intellect that mediates in transforming universal perceptions of the speculative intellect into particular perceptions (Avicenna, 1375 AP, Vol. 2, p. 352).

In *Shifa'*, Avicenna also adds other elements to the conditions related to the practical intellect and states that man possesses a universals-understanding faculty and a faculty with the function of thinking in particular affairs. However, Avicenna assigns the conditions of particular affairs related to the particular intellect merely to future possible affairs, because it is not possible for particular necessary and impossible affairs to reflect on whether they must be created or destroyed by the soul, and past affairs too – since they have passed – are not the objects of intellection regarding their creation (or lack of it). In this process, the practical faculty seeks help from the universal perceptions of the speculative intellect, and thus a particular result is achieved (Avicenna, 1405 AH, vol. 2, p. 185). Therefore, to act honestly, the major universal premise which proposes that “any honesty is good” is related to the speculative intellect, and the minor particular premise which proposes that “this honesty in this particular action is good” is perceived by the practical intellect. By the formal integration of these two premises, the form of the reasoning results in a particular motive conclusion which is the action of the practical intellect. The sophistication of Avicenna’s analysis is admirable, which has attracted Khwaja’s agreement as well (Avicenna, 1405 AH, Vol. 2, p. 185).

Following the same view, Mulla Sadra attributes particular judgment to the practical intellect and considers it the “usual accommodator” or the facilitator of action (Mulla Sadra, 1360 AP, p. 200). Similarly, Mulla Hadi Sabzvari formulates the argument resulting in action as follows: “any good action deserves to be performed” (major premise) and “honesty is good” (minor premise), the result is the universal proposition “honesty deserves to be performed” which is the judgment of the speculative intellect. Now, this universal speculative result appears in the position of the major premise of the second argument and integrated with the particular premise of the

practical intellect that says “this particular honesty is good” results in the particular result that “this honesty deserves performance and must be performed” as something perceived by the practical intellect. After explaining and analyzing the integration of the speculative and practical intellect in a formal logical process, Sabzvari concludes that both the speculative and practical intellects are two levels of one rational faculty, not two contrasting rational faculties, and that their difference is because of the objects of each and is not an essential difference; as the speculative intellect is associated to impossible objects, whereas in contrast, the practical intellect is effective in intellection on the quality of performance of action. (Mulla Sadra, 1368 AP, vol. 9, p. 83). Surprisingly, elsewhere Sabzvari – while arguing for this issue – regards the result of the aforementioned argument as particular, but presents those rational, particular and continual clauses together (Mulla Sadra, 1360 AP, p. 666). Unless, “continual” does not refer to the permanence of a judgment that is synonymous to universality or something similar to it, but is imagined as similar to Allama Tabatabai’s view in the margins of *al-Kifaya*. Under the phrase, “Whatever the intellect arrives at is also ordered by Divine Law”, Allama explains that regardless of the particularity or universality of the judgment of the practical intellect, no two individuals blessed with such an intellect disagree on the goodness of justice; and if there is a difference, it is regarding determining the instances (Tabatabai, n.d., Vol. 2, pp. 187-188); and this very productive inviolability of a judgment (even a particular one) can create the illusion of universality and permanence. He resolves some of the difficulties of Divine law using this very analysis. For example, by extending the accepted particularities, he explains the instances in the Holy Quran wherein a moral agent is punished instead of another for an unperformed action, albeit in return for an act of oppression he has done to him (Tabatabai, 1390 AP, vol. 10, p. 261).

Today, some of the experts do not agree with the reasons offered by those who regard that the perceptions of practical intellect are particular, and maintain that practical philosophy and universal sciences related to action are in the functional realm of the practical intellect; on this basis, they miscount the result of Avicenna’s view to the effect that the universally perceived object associated to the realm of action is inserted into the realm of speculative intellect merely for enjoying the condition of universality. The practical intellect understands essences not universality and Avicenna’s mistake is in considering both to be identical. This is because the essence of the judgments related to the realm of action is understood by the practical intellect which then generalizes them but with the help from the speculative intellect. In other words, effectively, there is a universality underlying the makeup of what the essence-understanding practical intellect observes. This

understanding of the goodness of the essence of action prepares the ground for the transition from essence to universality, and this second role is also played by the practical intellect, but by borrowing universality from the speculative intellect (Yazdanpanah, 1395 AP, p. 109).

## **2. Non-Cognitive Roles of the Practical Intellect**

### **2.1. The Role of the Practical Intellect in Managing the Body**

Functions other than perceptive function have also been included in the domain of the practical intellect. Among them is the necessary relationship of the practical intellect with the body in all its actions. This necessary relationship has been interpreted and explained as the practical intellect's need for the body in its actions (Avicenna, 1405 AH, vol. 2, p. 185). In the previous section, the circumstances of the body's management by the practical intellect were investigated. However, even though the practical intellect needs the body and its faculties in some cases, this need is neither permanent nor includes all aspects; rather, in some instances, it is essentially self-sufficient (Avicenna, 1405 AH, Vol. 2, p. 185).

However, there seems to be a confusion here, leading to a fallacy. If the essential mode of these two intellects is considered, the practical intellect does not essentially need the body either; because it has previously discussed in detail that it does not require the body in its perceptive potential which is its first and most important potential. It is true, however, that for the body to produce an action, the practical intellect needs the body – an axiomatic fact. Thus, it seems that there is some confusion in the analysis of “action”; if “action” refers to the faculty of the practical intellect it does not essentially need the body. However, if we mean the action produced by the body, the topic no longer includes the practical intellect. In other words, the action of the faculty of the practical intellect is different from the action produced by the body (normal action), and the faculty of the practical intellect, like the speculative intellect, does not need the body in some of its actions. The faculty of the practical intellect does not need the body in deriving that “the justice is good” although it clearly needs the body to physically implement justice.

### **2.2. The Practical Intellect's Servitude to the Speculative Intellect**

Compared to the speculative intellect, the practical intellect has a passive orientation and is influenced by the perceptions of the speculative intellect,



as a result of which, it receives perceptions that ultimately lead to action. Thus, one may say that the speculative intellect is passive in relation to the intellects superior to it (the Separate Intellects), and possesses the aspect of action and influence compared to the practical intellect.

The fact that the speculative intellect can achieve the output of action by employing the practical intellect is explained as follows: the practical intellect is subservient to the speculative intellect, and in the same manner, so are the illusory as well as the imaginary, inclinative, etc faculties, including all the animal faculties. Likewise, the vegetative faculties – such as the reproductive, growth and nutritive faculties – are also subservient to the animal faculties, although they are subservient to one another in order of appearance in the above list. Subsequently, the four natural faculties: digestive, retentive, attractive and repulsive, and ultimately, the four properties: hot, cold, dry, and wet, are subservient to the preceding ones, while serving one another (in a different way) (Avicenna, 1379 AP, p. 343). The same explanation is found in more detail in *Shifa* (Avicenna, 1405 AH, vol. 2, p. 41). Gazali explains the first phase of this potential as the speculative intellect receiving universals from the angels and presenting them to the practical intellect. However, from here on, the practical intellect has two potentials of particular perception and particular stimulation. After this, he mentions the elements and productive elements in detail (Gazali, 1409 AH, p. 95).

### **2.3. The Role of the Practical Intellect in Refining the Speculative Intellect**

The refining function of the practical intellect for the speculative intellect is an important but oft-neglected potential of the practical intellect. In this section, we can briefly say that in Avicenna's view, the essence of the intellect's relationship with the body is for the completion and refinement of the speculative intellect, and this is only actualized in the relationship between the soul and the body. The manager of this relationship is the practical intellect, and thus, the practical intellect is the mediator of this purification and its immediate agent (Avicenna, 1405 AH, Vol. 2, p. 342).

### **2.4. The Role of the Practical Intellect in the Humanness of an Action**

What are the similarities and differences between an action produced by man and one produced by an animal? In other words, if the difference between man and animal is in perceiving universals, and if we suppose particular perception in humans is achieved by the practical intellect, is this particular

perception totally the same as the particular perception in an animal for producing an action or is there a difference between them in this particular perception as well? The motivational faculty is subservient to the practical intellect and is the mediator of its perceptions up to the occurrence of action; this process (achieving some particular perception and consequently stimulating the motivational faculty) in an animal is also similar to what happens in humans. Now, with this similarity between humans and animals, can we consider animals as possessing the practical intellect too?

Mulla Hadi Sabzvari believes that when man wills a particular honesty, he reasons as follows: this action is honest, and any honesty is a must; therefore, this particular honesty must be performed and this particular judgment is the task of the practical intellect, which is achieved using the general major premise produced by the speculative intellect. Now the motivational faculty in man works just as in animal where the motivational faculty serves the illusory faculty and imagination. In man, the motivational faculty is the will, but in an animal it is desire; action is rational in humans, whereas in animals it is imaginary (Mulla Sadra, 1360 AP, p. 666).

He asserts that these differences are not just in the names of the words; rather, since human action is produced from a human origin it is actually different from animal action produced from particular animal origins (Mulla Sadra, 1368 AP, vol. 8, p. 240). Sha'rani points out that the intellect is what separates man and animal, which is divided into the practical and speculative; thus, the difference between man and animal is that man perceives the good and bad in actions and judges that some actions are good and others are bad, whereas an animal does not perceive any of these three; and this is why man, unlike animals, is aware of his obligation and duty; this is also why we read in the Holy Quran: "*Indeed hearing, eyesight, and the heart—all of these are accountable*" (Quran, 17:36). And this is the same practical intellect which the Ash'arites deny, while the speculative intellect is responsible for perceiving the universals. Thus, although animals sense pain, fear, and the desire to protect their offspring, they do not, however, have the capability to understand the general meanings of these concepts, and only understand their particular instances, just as a baby does before it learns to speak. This is why universal perception is called *Nutq* (literally, 'speaking') (Mazandarani, 1382 AP, Vol. 8, p. 176).

Thus, when comparing an action produced by man's practical intellect and action produced from an animal, it must be said that although both their actions are quite similar in the domain of the lower direct faculties of action, however, there is a fundamental difference in the primary origin of this process, in a way that it makes the essence of these two actions different.

### **3. The Difference in Essence of the Practical Intellect and the Speculative Intellect and their Status in the Human Soul**

It has been explained that the practical intellect has a cognitive function and that there are three theories in this regard:

In the first theory, the practical perceptive function is considered to be limited to particulars, which is Avicenna's view and that of a large number of other philosophers. The second theory does not accept such a great difference between the speculative and practical intellect and even while it is more inclined to accept the particularities of the objects of the practical intellect, this theory also regards the universal perception of the speculative intellect to be possible with help from the practical intellect (Sabzvari). The third view is from one of the contemporary scholars and believes in the essence-understanding practical intellect which includes universality as well; however, the scientific manifestation of its universality is with the help of the practical intellect but through employing the practical intellect.

Clearly, all three views express the difference between the two intellects as far as their intelligible object is concerned but are the speculative and the practical intellects different from the viewpoint of producing actions in addition to being different in the domain of the intelligible (the passive mode of the intellect)? In response to this question, Avicenna, while considering both the speculative and practical intellects to be immaterial substances, asserts that in terms of the differences in the perceptible of these intellects in the way that has been explained before, the intelligible of the speculative intellect is from the rational superior substances, and the perceptible of the practical intellect is from the superior substances of the soul level (Avicenna, 2007, p. 117).

On the same basis, one can conclude that the subject of both these two groups of perceptible objects is also rational or spiritual. Elsewhere, he emphasizes that none of these two intellects is synonymous with the human soul; rather, the soul possesses these two faculties and it is a unique substance (Avicenna, 1405 AH, vol. 2, p. 185).

Mulla Sadra further develops this view and considers the speculative part of the intellect to be the essence and mode of identity of the human soul, while at the same time, he does not regard the product of the practical intellect as constituting the human soul; rather, from the spiritual aspect, he analyzes it as the mode supplementary to the body and as the soul's attention to its lower levels (Mulla Sadra, n.d., p. 366). An ambiguous point here is that both Mulla Sadra and Avicenna consider another difference between the practical and speculative intellects. The speculative intellect has a passive aspect in relation to its superior levels (the Separate Intellects) and the

practical intellect has an active aspect in relation to its lower levels (the soul that possesses a body) (Mulla Sadra, 1368 AP, vol. 9, p. 82). If one indeed has a passive mode and the other has an active one; one is passive in relation to the superior levels and the other is active in relation to the lower levels; and if the modes cause the elements to depart from their essentiality, then there is no difference between the passive and the active modes; and if one claims differently, he must present an argument for it.

In other words, the essentiality of the passive identity compared to the non-constituency of the active identity – although both of them are modes and they seem to have the same rule in being constituent – is not evident and must be explained, whereas Avicenna and Mulla Sadra's claim has apparently not been explained. This difficulty seems to be more serious for Mulla Sadra, considering his philosophical foundations because he regards even the accidents as the mode of substance existence and the substance as the mode of existence of a thing. Thus, the Peripatetic distinctions between the modes are null in a rereading of his philosophical system. This important issue needs a detailed and independent discussion, which is put aside since the main focus of this article is on Avicenna.

## **Conclusion**

The role of the practical intellect in producing moral action is the subject of this article. By studying this topic, it becomes clear that Avicenna – unlike some experts who do accept any perceptive function for the practical intellect and only consider a motivational function for it – places perception, understanding, judgment and opinion in the functional domain of the practical intellect, although he regards this perception merely as particular and considers its particularity to be different from the particularity of the imaginary and illusory cognitions (animal perceptive faculties).

The motivational and stimulating functions; dominance over the motivational and inclinative faculties, etc and their subservience; serving the speculative intellect; refinement and completion of the speculative intellect, are among the other roles of the practical intellect in producing moral action that can be presented from Avicenna's view.

Similarly, regarding the relationship between the action produced from an animal and that produced by the practical intellect, it was shown that while humans and animals share commonalities in some of the lower and direct stages of producing action, the nature of their actions is basically different in respect to their primary origin. Another point that is worthy of mention at the end of this study is the later philosophers' use of Avicenna's views; the

proponents and opponents of his views have made ample use of his explanations and views in formulating their ideas and owe much to him. Thus, one must say that the centrality of the practical intellect in producing moral action in Avicenna's philosophy is such that most of other the discussions regarding moral action are directly or indirectly based on it or lead to it from the principles and derivatives that are involved in this topic.

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