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Discourse 1: The Criteria for Humanity

I have been asked to discuss the question of the criteria for humanity. If we were to do so from the viewpoint of biology, this would be an easy matter since we would be dealing with the human body and the place of human beings in the animal world, in which case there is no difference between individuals. By the standard of anatomy, medicine, and, even to some extent, psychology, there are no major differences between two or more individuals.

But is humanity limited to the body? Is human perfection and mobility confined to man's physical aspect? In humanistic sciences there is talk of perfect and imperfect man, of the low and high kind. What type of human being is ethically and socially worthy of respect because of his or her perfection, or deserving of contempt because of his or her imperfections?

This is a topic which has always attracted attention not only in human knowledge, but also in various religions. For example, the Quran speaks of human beings who are higher than angels and worthy of homage by the latter. It also mentions human beings who are inferior to animals.

What is the criterion which measures the differences between human beings? This question is not only related to religion. Materialistic philosophers, too, who do not believe in God and religion, discuss the question of man, humanity and superior and inferior beings.

What is the criterion according to these philosophers? Can we say that human beings are equal genetically, but that they differ in knowledge. That is, something which is acquired not inherited, so that a person with more knowledge is higher than one with less? Is this related to academic knowledge which gives superiority according to the level and stage of one's studies? Do we respect people only in proportion to their learning? Is Abu Dharr honoured because he was more learned than his contemporaries? Is Mu'awiyah blameworthy and disliked because he had inferior knowledge?

I do not believe that learning is a criterion for humanity. If it were so, we should say that Einstein was the most endowed with qualities of humanity since he was the most learned man of his time.

Another view is that although knowledge is one of the requisites of humanity, and although the

importance of awareness of the self, of the society and of the world cannot be denied, it is inadequate. This view claims that humanity is measured by character and disposition. A person may be very learned, but if he has a bad character, would he be considered to be a real human being?

An animal behaves according to its instincts and it possesses no will to rule over its instincts. When we call a dog a faithful animal, its faithfulness is instinctive. An ant is prudent by instinct. There are also human beings in the world who have a disposition resembling that of an animal. They possess their natural instincts, but have done nothing to refine themselves, and are condemned only to follow their nature.

The awareness of an animal is limited to its own time and place, while man's awareness allows him to know the past and have an idea of the future and also step beyond his own area and even his own planet. But the question of character is a different matter. Knowledge is related to what one is taught, while character is related to training and the forming of habits.

I do not think that knowledge as a criterion of humanity is acceptable and I will later explain what type of people support it. The second view, i.e., characteristics as a criterion of humanity, has more supporters. But we may ask what kind of characteristics and dispositions? One of the answers to this question is that love is the desired criterion, love, which is the mother of other fine dispositions. Thus, if one bases one's character on the love of human beings, one has real humanity. Such a person is as interested in others as in one's "Self" or even more interested in them.

In religion this is called self–sacrifice. There is a statement in a book that there is an instruction in all religions to love for others what you love for yourself, and dislike for them what you dislike for yourself. This has been stated in our traditions. This is the logic of love. As we know, in the Hindu schools and in Christianity, much emphasis is laid on love. But they have gone so far as to lose sight of everything else and maintain that love is to be a course of action in all circumstances. Thus the love of both these ideologies is a kind of stupefaction and the adequacy of love as a criterion of humanity is to be discussed.

But if we accept the love for other human beings as the criterion, the issue will be solved more easily than if we accept knowledge as the criterion. For example, concerning our preference for Abu Dharr over Mu'awiyah, we are in a better position to judge them on the basis of love. Mu'awiyah was a selfish and ambitious man who exploited others by force.

Abu Dharr was the reverse, and although he had all the possibilities and even though Mu'awiyah was prepared to offer him many privileges, yet he was anxious about the fate of others, particularly those who were oppressed by Mu'awiyah. That is why he arose against this wicked man and spent his last years in exile where he died. Thus, we call Abu Dharr human as he loved others, and we consider Mu'awiyah inhuman as he was only interested in himself.

Or, similarly, why do we think Hadrat Ali, peace be upon him, is a perfect human being? Because he felt

society's pain, and his 'I' had become 'We'. His personality attracted all others. He was not an individual separated from others. He was a limb or organ of a whole body. He himself said that a pain in one part of society, as in a body, made itself felt in the other parts, one of which was himself. All had declared this long before the humanistic philosophy of twentieth century claimed it as an ideal.

When he heard that a governor appointed by him had attended a feast, he wrote him a letter of protest which is quoted in the Nahj ul-Balagha. It is not mentioned what kind of a feast it had been, whether there had been drinking or gambling or dancing. The governor was considered guilty by Hadrat Ali because he had participated in an aristocratic feast which was not attended by any poor people.

He says, "I never believed a governor and representative of mine would attend such a party of the nobility." He then describes his own life and says that he felt other people's pain more than his own and their pain prevented him from feeling his own. His words show that he was a truly learned and wise sage. Yet the reason why we honor him so deeply is not only because of his wide knowledge, but because he was human. He was not unaware of the destiny of others.

Another school of thought considers resolution and will power as the criterion for humanity. It claims that if a person can dominate himself, his instincts, nerves and passions by his will–power and reason and not be dominated over by his inclinations and desires, he is really human.

There is a difference between desire and will. Desire is an attraction by an exterior force, a relation between man and external objects, like a hungry man drawn by food, or sexual attraction. Even sleep is an attraction. So is desire for rank and position.

But resolution is something internal, which liberates one from the urges of desire. It places desires at the disposal of will-power to employ them as it considers expedient. Most of our past moralists emphasized resolution as a criterion for humanity. People, unlike animals, which are ruled by instinct, can decide to act against their own inclinations. Thus a person of resolution is more human than one who cannot control the 'self'.

Another criterion for humanity is freedom. What does this mean? It means that to the extent that one tolerates no force, and is not captivated by any power and can choose freely, one is human. In modern schools of thought, much emphasis is laid on freedom as one of the criteria of humanity. Is this view correct or not? It is both correct and incorrect. As a requisite for humanity, it is correct, but as the sole criterion for humanity, it is wrong.

Islam has laid great emphasis on self-control.

I relate a story here in connection with it. It is narrated that the Prophet was passing by a place in Medina where a number of young men were testing their strength by lifting a heavy stone. When they saw the Prophet, they asked him to act as judge. The Prophet agreed, and at the end of the competition he said, "Do you know who is the strongest? It is he who controls his anger and does not allow it to

overcome him. He must not use his anger in a way contrary to God's satisfaction and should be able to dominate over his own desires."

On that day, the Prophet transformed a physical contest into a spiritual one. What he meant was that physical strength shows manliness but it is not the only sign of it. True manliness is in the strength of will power.

We call Hadrat Ali the 'Lion of God', for he was manlier than all in two ways: Externally in society and on the battlefield where he could overthrow his strongest opponents; and, more important than that, internally, meaning that he was in perfect control of himself and of every whim and wish.

Jalal al-din Rumi tells a story in his Mathnavi about Hadrat Ali as a young man of 24 or 25 in which he portrays a fine picture of manliness. He had thrown down his adversary in a battle and was sitting on his chest, about to kill him. The man spit on Hadrat's face. Annoyed, Hadrat Ali temporarily leaves the man and walks about for a while. The man asks why he left him to himself. Hadrat answers, "If I had killed you then, it would have been in anger, not in the way of my duty to my goal and for the sake of God." This is a wonderful example of self-control.

Hadrat says in his testament to his son, Imam Hasan, peace be upon him, "Consider yourself and your life above every mean deed. In return for what you pay out of your life for desires, you receive nothing. Do not make yourself a slave of others, for God has created you free." The question of freedom is something that the school of existentialism, too, accepts as a criterion for humanity.

Another criterion for humanity is the question of duty and responsibility which began with Kant and has been emphasized in our own time. This means feeling responsible to society, to oneself and to one's family. How should one obtain this feeling and what is its basis? Is it created in one's conscience?

Another school of thought, including Plato, considers beauty as the criterion for humanity. All schools recognize and approve of justice. One school approves of justice from an ethical viewpoint. Another one approves of it because it considers that there is a relation between justice and freedom, while Plato thinks justice is good in both the individual and society, because it leads to poise and beauty. Of course, his idea of beauty is obviously spiritual beauty.

On another occasion we will judge between all these schools and we will review the views of Islam on this issue.

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