

Lesson 14: God's Power and Will

Power and ability are among the attributes of existential perfections, and God who possesses all existential perfections has also the attribute of power (*qudrah*). God, therefore, is All-powerful and All-mighty. There is no dispute that God possesses this attribute, but there are different views on the essence of power and the extent of God's power.

The Essence of Power

There are two views about the definition of power and who the powerful (*qadir*) is:

1. *Qadir* is He who has an attribute through which it is possible for Him to do or not to do a certain thing. ¹ This definition is acceptable to a group of the theologians.
2. *Qadir* is He who does something if He wants to and refrains from doing something if He wants to. ² This definition is acceptable to the philosophers and another group of the theologians.

The meaning of both definitions is that the powerful is not concomitant with an action or abandonment of an action. In other words, the powerful agent (*frei*) is he who is not compelled to do or not to do something; rather, he is independent. Power, therefore, is equal to or a concomitant of free-will (*ikhtiyar*). The opposite of the powerful and independent agent is the compelled and unfree agent who has no ability not to do something and whose action is certain and determined. The differences between free and unfree agent are the following:

1. The free agent is aware of his action as making a choice necessitates awareness, but the unfree agent is not aware of his action.
2. It is possible to separate action, in terms of the essence of the agent, from the agent, but it is impossible to distinguish the action from the unfree agent.
3. Since power is the same with respect to doing or not doing something, the powerful and free agent wills for his action. Hence, free action is tantamount to willpower (*irdah*), but the action of the unfree agent is not tantamount to willpower (as it is an involuntary action).

It becomes clear from what has been said that after the materialization of willpower, free action becomes incumbent and definite, but this incumbency is subsequent to willpower and free-will, and it has no contradiction with the independence of the agent.

It is to be noted that in philosophical parlance, God has eternal will and providence in creating every being with total ability and since they are creatures devoid of materiality – such as the intellects (*‘uqūl*) – the essential possibility of their ability is absolute and not restricted by specific potential possibility, time, place, and relationship. Such beings are not temporally contingent and they constantly receive the grace of existence from God. As a result, this belief has no contradiction with the independence of God, for according to their belief, God constantly bestows existence to them by His eternal will. On account of this belief, therefore, the philosophers must not be thought to be against the independence of God, as this attribution can be seen in the remarks of many theologians.³

The Proof of God's Power and Will

Agitation or compulsion in action can be imagined when the agent is overtaken and compelled by a superior being. In this case, the agent can be considered forced and agitated; that is, the superior being imposes the action to the agent and influences him to do so contrary to his desire.

In view of the fact that God is the most Superior Being and He is not compelled and overpowered by any being, agitation and compulsion in action cannot be imagined concerning Him. Therefore, He has created the universe with power and will.

In other words, power and will are among the attributes of existential perfection, and the human nature or disposition (*fiṭrah*) which leads to the existence of God makes him recognize the Perfect and Supreme Being who possesses all existential perfections.

In addition, the order and stability of the universe are a clear testimony to the power and will of a Creator, just as they indicate His knowledge and cognizance. As such, whenever referring to the creation of the heavens and the earth the Holy Qur'an calls to mind that their creation guides the human being to the power and knowledge of the Creator, as it has been stated, thus:

اللَّهُ الَّذِي خَلَقَ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ وَمِنَ الْأَرْضِ مِثْلَهُنَّ يَتَنَزَّلُ الْأَمْرُ بَيْنَهُنَّ لِتَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ قَدْ أَحَاطَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عِلْمًا ﴿١٠٩﴾

*"It is Allah who has created seven heavens, and of the earth [a number] similar to them. The command gradually descends through them, that you may know that Allah has power over all things, and that Allah comprehends all things in knowledge."*⁴

This argument has also been pointed out in the sayings of Imām ‘Alī (‘a):

وَأَرَانَا مِنْ مَلَكُوتِ قُدْرَتِهِ، وَعَجَائِبِ مَا نَطَقَتْ بِهِ آثَارُ حِكْمَتِهِ.

“He showed us the realm of His Might, and such wonders which speak of His Wisdom.”⁵

وَأَقَامَ مِنْ شَوَاهِدِ الْبَيِّنَاتِ عَلَى لَطِيفِ صُنْعَتِهِ، وَعَظِيمِ قُدْرَتِهِ.

“And He has established such clear proofs for His delicate creative power and great might.”⁶

The Extent of God's Power

The proofs of God's power indicate the vast expanse of His power. The vast expanse of power has two meanings. One is that God is capable of creating any essence (*dhāt*) or quiddity (*māhiyyah*) which is a possible being (*mumkin al-wujūd*) although He has not created every possible being according to His wisdom, knowledge and will.

Instead, He has created that which is necessitated by the system of what is best and most wholesome. Another meaning is that all creatures are linked with the power of God. From this perspective, there is no difference between the physical and non-physical beings, human and non-human. As a result, the human actions are also within the realm of the vast expanse of God's power.

The term “universality of God's power” contained in books of theology refers to the second meaning. This point is raised here because some theologians have set limits on the scope of God's power. For instance, some of them have said that the power of God has nothing to do with the undesirable actions done by human beings because they believe that such a link between God's power and those actions necessitates attributing them to Him which is in conflict with the principle that God is free from evil acts.⁷

The reply to this is that the criterion for linking power to the creatures also exists in the human actions, and that is their being possible beings (*mumkin al-wujūd*). No possible being could exist without the power of God. As Muḥaqqiq al-Ṣādiq has said,

وَعُمُومِيَّةُ الْعِلَّةِ تَسْتَلْزِمُ عُمُومِيَّةَ الصِّفَةِ.

“And the universality of the Cause necessitates the universality of the Attribute [of Power].”⁸

That is to say that the cause and criterion for linking God's power to the creatures (their essential contingency) is general. The link of God's power to the creatures, therefore, is also general and universal.

Meanwhile, an abominable act – on account of its being abominable – cannot be ascribed to God, but rather from the perspective of its existence and reality that it is encompassed by the power of God and in

this perspective, it is not abominable.

From the cosmic point of view, for example, honesty and lying are the same and in this perspective, they are both ontologically 'good' but moral goodness and evil are derived after the materialization of speech (*takallum*) and judging them with the dictates of reason and religious laws.

That which conforms to the laws of reason and religion is good, otherwise it is bad. And the basis of this conformity or non-conformity is indeed the freewill and desire of the human being; hence, moral goodness or evil can be traced back to his action.

Power and Potentiality

Power (*qudrah*) is a characteristic of the agent (*fai'il*) while potentiality (*imkan*) is a characteristic of action (*fi'il*). In other words, power is the attribute of the powerful (*qadir*) while potentiality is the attribute of the possible (*maqdur*). There is a talk, therefore, about the link of power to action; potentiality (as opposed to obligatoriness (*wajib*) and refusal (*imtinai*)) has been given as presumption on the issue or linkage of power, because the obligatory (*wajib*) and impossible (*imtinai*) – on account of concomitance with necessity (*darurah*) – cannot be subjected to or bound by power.

Necessity in the Necessary by Essence (*wajib bi 'dh-dhat*) means that the *Wajib* is not in need of the link of an external power to His existence. And necessity in the impossible by essence (*mumtani' bi 'dh-dhat*) means that its absence is definite and its existence is impossible. As such, it is will not be bound by power because the role of power is to exert influence and bestow existence.

Reply to Some Misgivings

At this juncture, one can easily reply to some misgivings in relation to the universality of God's power:

1. Can God create a being which He cannot annihilate after creating it? If He cannot, it follows that His power is limited and if He can, it follows that after creating it, His power is limited with respect to the continuity of its existence.

The reply is that such a being is impossible by essence, because the hypothetical being is possible by essence (*mumkin bi 'dh-dhat*) and necessary by essence (*wajib bi 'dh-dhat*) at the same time. Being a created one (*makhluq*) it is possible by essence and being perishable, it is impossible by essence. And this is contradiction in essence and essential impossibility.

2. Can God create something similar to Himself? If He can, it follows that the principle of His uniqueness is void and if He cannot, it follows that His power is limited.

The reply to this is that such a being is impossible by essence, because if he is similar to God, it follows that he is the Necessary Being by essence, but since he is created, he is tantamount to non-being and

possible being by essence, and to be possible by essence and necessary by essence at the same time is contradiction in essence, and it is impossible.

3. Can God put the universe inside a chicken egg without making the universe become smaller or the egg becoming bigger? If He can, it follows that the law of proportionality of the container (*ḥarf*) and the contained (*maḥḥarf*) is invalid and if He cannot, it follows that His power is limited.

The reply is that this assumption necessitates impossibility because as hinted in the misgiving itself, the proportionality of the container and the contained is a rational principle and denial of it necessitates contradiction. That is, the contained is proportional and at the same time not proportional to its container, and thus, not bound by power.

In reply to this question, Imām ‘Alī (‘a) has said:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى لَا يُنْسَبُ إِلَى الْعَجْزِ، وَالَّذِي سَأَلْتَنِي لَا يَكُونُ

That is to say that impotence or inability has no place in God, the Blessed and Exalted, and that which is raised in the question is impossible.⁹

Review Questions

1. State the concept of power and write down the two views in this regard.
2. State the difference between the free (*mukhtār*) and unfree (*mawjib*) agent.
3. State the proof of God’s power while considering His being the absolutely perfect.
4. Explain the proof of God’s power while considering the stable system of the universe.
5. Write down the reason for the vast expanse of God’s power along with its meaning.
6. What is the meaning of the term “universality of God’s power”?
7. Can the power of God be bound by things which are existentially impossible by essence? Why?
8. Can God create a being which He cannot extinguish after creating it?
9. Can God create a being like Himself? Why?

¹ Talkhīṭ al-Muḥaṭṭil, p. 269.

² Qawā’id al-Murīd, p. 82.

³ In this regard, see Talkhīṭ al-Muḥaṭṭil, p. 268; Qawā’id al-‘Aqīd, pp. 49–50; Irshād al-ḥalībī, p. 183.

⁴ Sīrat al-ḥalaq 65: 12.

⁵ Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 91.

- [6.](#) Ibid., Sermon 165.
- [7.](#) This notion has been attributed to the Mu'tazilah school of thought.
- [8.](#) Kashf al-Murād, station (maqā'ad) 3, chap. 2, issue 2.
- [9.](#) Shaykh al-ʿAdāq, Al-Tawāḍ, section (bāb) 9, ʿadāth 9.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/discursive-theology-volume-1-ali-rabbani-gulpaygani/lesson-14-gods-power-and-will#comment-0>