

Lesson 16: The Divine Will and Decree

One of the Attributes of Perfection of God is that of will (*irādah*) and decree (*mashiyyah*), as *Al-murād* (the Desirous or Willing) is considered one of the Divine Names. In the Holy Qur'an, the words *mashiyyah*, *irādah* and *al-murād* have not been used for God, but in many verses the phrases *shā' Allāh*, *yashā' Allāh*, *arād Allāh*, *aradnā*, *yurād Allāh*, and *nurād* have been used.

In view of these action words, the attributes of *mashiyyah* and *irādah* and the nouns *shā'ir* (decree-giver) and *murād* can be abstracted and used as the Attributes and Names of God. In addition, the usage of the said Attributes and Names can also be found in Prophetic traditions.¹

Some theologians have regarded will and decree as an attribute while others have treated them as two separate attributes, and something has been transmitted regarding the dimensions of the difference between the two.² What can be inferred from the Qur'anic usages of these two words is that *mashiyyah* is only used in cosmic (*takwīnī*) matters while *irādah* is used in cosmic as well as legislative (*tashrī'ī*) matters. Keeping in view the totality of [relevant] verses of the Qur'an and traditions, it can be argued that with respect to God, *irādah* and *mashiyyah* refer to an attribute.

Some Views on the Essence of Will

Different views have been expressed by philosophers and theologians on the essence of will (*irādah*) with respect to God and whether it is one of the Attributes of Essence or one of the Attributes of Action:

1. God's will in relation to His Actions (cosmic will) is identical with the origination of actions and His will in relation to human actions (legislative will) is the command to execute the actions.

Shaykh al-Mufīd³ has subscribed to this view.⁴

‘Allāmah al-‘Abbāsī⁵ who has also regarded the cosmic will of God as one of His Attributes of Action has said, “The will which is attributed to God is abstracted from His Action or from the Action itself which is realized outwardly, or from the total realization of the Action.”⁵

2. The cosmic will of God means His knowledge that the action which is consistent with order is the best.

This view is popular among the Muslim philosophers.[6](#)

3. The cosmic will of God means His knowledge that an action encompasses what is good for the human beings and all other creatures. The Mu‘tazilah and Im‘amiyyah theologians who advocate this view call this knowledge as *d‘‘‘* (motive).[7](#)

4. The will of God is an attribute separate from His knowledge, power, and Attributes of Essence, and it is among the Essential and Eternal Attributes of God. This view is acceptable to the Ash‘irah.[8](#)

5. The will of God is an Essential Attribute distinct from other Essential Attributes, and at the same time, it is contingent (*d‘‘ith*). Its state is either contingent in essence as claimed by the Karr‘amiyyah group,[9](#) or contingent neither in essence nor other than essence (*d‘‘ith l‘ f‘ ma‘all*) as described by Ab‘ ‘Al‘ and Ab‘ H‘shim.[10](#)

6. *Ir‘dah* is one of the Attributes of the Divine Essence, but it has negative sense; that is, the agency (*f‘iliyyah*) of God is not based on compulsion or forgetfulness (conscious and volitional).

This view has been adopted by ‘usayn al-Najj‘r, a Mu‘tazil‘ theologian.[11](#)

7. The essence of *ir‘dah* is exaltation (*ibtih‘j*) and contentment (*ri‘‘‘*), and it is divided into two, viz. essential (*dh‘‘t*) and active (*fi‘l*) *ir‘dah*:

The essential exaltation and contentment is the essential will while the active exaltation and contentment is the active will (*ir‘dah–ye fi‘l*). Since God is Pure (*‘irf*) and Absolute (*ma‘‘*) Being, He is essentially elated (*mubtahij bi ‘dh–dh‘t*), and His Essence is being Self-contented (essential contentment (*ri‘‘‘ bi ‘dh–dh‘t* equals essential will (*ir‘dah–ye dh‘‘t*)).

Meanwhile, essential exaltation and contentment necessitates exaltation and contentment in the stage of action, for “Whoever loves something loves its effects” (that is, exaltation and contentment in the stage of action equals active will (*ir‘dah–ye fi‘l*)). Mu‘aqqiq al-‘afah‘n‘, better known as Kamp‘n‘,[12](#) has subscribed to this view.[13](#)

Assessment of the Views

The first view which has regarded *ir‘dah* as only an Attribute of Action is consistent with some traditions transmitted from the pure Im‘ams (‘a) about the Divine will and decree. We shall elaborate later.

The second and third views have consensus in interpreting *ir‘dah* to mean the eternal knowledge of God. Yet, they also differ [in the detail]; in the second view, *ir‘dah* is interpreted to mean knowledge of the best order while in the third view, it refers to knowledge of the exigency of the action. The second view is compatible with the criteria of discursive intellect (*‘aql–e na‘ar‘*) while the third view is harmonious with the standards of practical intellect (*‘aql–e ‘amal*). The discussion on the excellence of

order belongs to the sphere of theoretical intellect while the discussion on the exigency of an action pertains to the domain of practical intellect. We shall review these two views later.

No explanation or justification of the fourth view has ever been transmitted, and it has been put forth as a mere claim. A review of it shall be made after the following examination.

While considering *irādah* an Essential Attribute of God, the fifth view has treated it as contingent (*ʿudūth*). It is evident that pre-existence (*azaliyyah*) and contingency (*ʿudūth*) cannot go hand in hand.

The sixth view is also unacceptable because *irādah* is one of the Positive Attributes (*al-ʿifat al-thubūtiyyah*) and not one of the Negative Attributes (*al-ʿifat al-salbiyyah*). Therefore, it must be not identified as a Negative Attribute.

The point of strength of the seventh view is in interpreting *irādah* in the realms of Essence and Action. Yet, the problem with this view is in treating the concepts of exaltation (*ibtihāj*) and contentment (*riʿāʾ*) as identical with those of will (*irādah*) and decree (*mashiyyah*), and interchanging the two concepts is similar to interchanging knowledge and power, which is inadmissible. In addition, traditions stipulate that *irādah* is contingent and one of the Attributes of Action, and not an Attribute of Essence.

An Examination and Analysis

The criterion for proving the Positive Attributes with respect to God is that an attribute which exists from the perfections of the Being by Himself (the Absolute Being) exists in God in the most perfect and complete manner, for it is impossible for God who is the Necessary Being to have no existential perfections.

However, some attributes are perfections of a particular being and not by the Being that exists by Himself; for example, seeing by means of the faculty of sight, ability to walk [by feet], and the like (from among the perfections of the natural creatures). Such existential perfections cannot be established for God because doing so necessitates corporeality (*jasmaniyyah*), movement, change and other attributes of deficiency which are concomitant with contingency (*imkān*) and insufficiency.

Meanwhile, the way of knowing whether an attribute is one of the perfections of the Self-existent or one of particular existential perfections (natural creatures) is to take away contingent (*imkān*), physical (*madd*) and natural (*ʿabʿ*) traits from it. The concept which remains after the purging is one of the Attributes of existential perfection [of the Absolute Being].

However, if the essence of the said attribute also ceases to exist after purging those traits, it follows that the said attribute is one of the perfections of a particular being and not the Self-existent. For example, knowledge in the human being has some characteristics and after purging knowledge of those characteristics, nothing remains except discovery (*inkishāf*) and presence (*ʿuṣṣr*). That is, the reality of the known (*maʿlūm*) before itself is discovery and presence, and this is the truth of knowledge. We can

establish this truth for God.

Now, if we apply this method to *irāḍah*, we will find out that no other attribute will remain except free-will (*ikhtiyār*). The essence of *irāḍah* in the human being is a mental (*nafsānī*) state which is derived from knowledge and desire (*shawq*). This mental state is only necessary in relation to the actions of the limbs (*afʿāl-e jawārī*), and not necessary with respect to inward actions (*afʿāl-e jawānī*) which include *irāḍah*. That is, *irāḍah* is one of the voluntary actions of the self (*nafs*) but it is not preceded by itself. Meanwhile, once an action is materialized, *irāḍah* ceases to exist whereas the attribute of free-will remains the same prior to, during, and after, an action.

From the above analysis, it can be inferred that what is one of the Attributes of Perfection for the Self-existent is the attribute of *ikhtiyār* and not *irāḍah*, and that which is an Essential Attribute is *ikhtiyār* and not *irāḍah*. It is true that *irāḍah* can be abstracted from the stage of action, just as the attributes of *rizq* (sustenance) and *al-rāzīq* (the Sustainer) are abstracted from the stage of action.

The totality of the causes and preliminaries of the action are attributed to God (relative to the agent or mover) as well as to action (cause and effect relationship). In the context of the first relationship, God is called *Al-murād* (the Willing and Desirous One) and the Divine Will is abstracted, while in the context of the second relationship, the action is God's object of will (*murād*). [14](#)

It is worth mentioning that the present discourse pertains to the derivation of the essence of *irāḍah* from knowledge or power, and not the unity of its manifestations as the Divine Unity in the Attributes demands. For example, the concept or essence of power is not identical with the concept or essence of power, although they are the same for being among the manifestations of the Divine Essence.

The Divine Will as Described in Traditions

As we have said earlier, *irāḍah* has been regarded in the traditions (*aḥādīth*) as one of the Attributes of God's Action, thereby stipulating its being contingent (*ḥādīth*). Interpreting it to mean eternal knowledge is equally negated [in the traditions]. Now, we shall quote below some examples of pertinent traditions:

1. Muḥammad ibn Muslim reported that Imām al-Ḥadiq (ʿa) said:

الْمَشِيَّةُ مُحَدَّثَةٌ.

“The will [of God] is contingent.” [15](#)

2. In a tradition transmitted by ʿAfwān ibn Yaʿyā from Imām al-Kāsim (ʿa), after stating the characteristics of *irāḍah* in the human being and that these characteristics are impossible with regards to God, the Imām (ʿa) has said:

فَإِرَادَةُ اللَّهِ هِيَ الْفِعْلُ لَا غَيْرُ ذَلِكَ، يَقُولُ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ

“The will of Allah is the action itself and nothing else. He say, ‘Be’ and it is.” [16](#)

3. ‘[ʿIm ibn ʿam](#) asked [Imam al-ʿadiq](#) (‘a), thus: “Has God been the Desirous (*al-murʿd*) from eternity?” The [Imam](#) (‘a) replied:

إِنَّ الْمُرِيدَ لَا يَكُونُ إِلَّا لِمُرَادٍ مَعَهُ، بَلْ لَمْ يَزَلْ عَالِمًا قَادِرًا ثُمَّ أَرَادَ

“Indeed there cannot be the Desirous (*al-murʿd*) without the object of desire (*murʿd*). Instead, He has been all-knowing and all-powerful from eternity and then He willed.” [17](#)

4. [Bakr ibn Aʿyan](#) asked [Imam al-ʿadiq](#) (‘a), “Are the knowledge and will of Allah identical or distinct from each other?” The [Imam](#) (‘a) replied:

“[His] knowledge is different from [His] will on account of which we say, ‘I will do something if Allah *wills*,’ and we do not say, ‘I will do something if Allah *knows*.’ Thus, that we say, “If Allah wills” shows that He has not desired prior to this. Whenever He desires something to materialize, it will materialize the way He wants it, and the knowledge of Allah precedes His will.” [18](#)

5. [Imam al-Riʿ](#) (‘a) is reported to have said:

الْمَشِيَّةُ وَالْإِرَادَةُ مِنْ صِفَاتِ الْأَفْعَالِ

“The decree and will [of God] is among the Attributes of Actions.” [19](#)

6. In his debate with ‘[Imr](#) the Sabian, [Imam al-Riʿ](#) (‘a) has said:

وَأَعْلَمُ أَنَّ الْإِبْدَاعَ وَالْمَشِيَّةَ وَالْإِرَادَةَ مَعْنَاهَا وَاحِدٌ وَأَسْمَاؤُهَا ثَلَاثَةٌ

“And know that origination, decree and will have the same meaning and they have three names.” [20](#)

7. In a long debate between [Imam al-Riʿ](#) (‘a) and [Sulaym](#) [Marwaz](#), the renowned [Muʿtazil](#) theologian of [Khur](#)s, that took place in the court of [the ‘[Abb](#)sid caliph] [Maʿm](#), one of the issues they disputed on was whether the will of God is one of the Attributes of Essence or the Attributes of Action and whether will is identical with knowledge or a distinct attribute. [Sulaym](#) has considered will one of the Essential Attributes and interpreted it as knowledge (as the [Muʿtazilah](#) do subscribe) while [Imam al-Riʿ](#) (‘a) has regarded it as contingent and an Attribute of Action. [21](#)

Review Questions

1. Write down the difference between the will and the decree of God by considering their Qur'anic usages.
2. State the views of philosophers and theologians about the Divine will.
3. Write down the correct view about the essence of will with respect to God along with its proof.
4. What is the criterion for establishing the Positive Attributes in God?
5. What is the reply of Imām al-Ḥafḍī (ʿa) to the question of Bakr ibn Aʿyan about God's will?

1. See Shaykh al-Ḥafḍī, Kitāb al-Tawḥīd, sections on the Attributes of the Essence and Actions, and on the Divine will and decree.
2. See Raghīb al-Isfahānī, Al-Mufradāt, under the words irādah and mashiyyah.
3. Shaykh al-Mufīd: the common designation of Abī ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Nuʿmān al-Ḥarīthī (d. 413 AH/1022) who was a great Shāfiʿī jurist (fiqh), traditionist (muʿaddith) and scholar of scholasticism (mutakallim). Notable among his disciples were Sayyid Murtaḥā ʿAlam al-Hudūdī, Sayyid ar-Raḥīmī, Shaykh al-Ḥafḍī, and al-Najashī. Around 200 works are attributed to him, from which Kitāb al-ʿIrshād, Ikhtiyār, Awḥāl al-Maqālāt, Al-ʿAmāl, and Al-Maqnāʿah can be cited. See Shaykh al-Mufīd, Kitāb al-ʿIrshād: The Book of Guidance into the Lives of the Twelve Imāms, trans. I.K.A. Howard (London: The Muhammadi Trust, 1981), introduction, pp. xxi-xxvii; Martin J. McDermott, The Theology of al-Shāikh al-Mufīd (Beirut: Dar al-Mashreq, 1978), introduction, pp. 8-45. [Trans.]
4. Shaykh al-Mufīd, Awḥāl al-Maqālāt, p. 58.
5. ʿAllamah al-Ḥabībī, Nihāyat al-ʿIlm, stage (marʿalah) 12, chap. 10.
6. Fakhr al-Sabzī, Sharḥ Manzūmah, farḥ 2, discussion on will (irādah); ʿAdr al-Mutaʿallihīn, Al-Asfār al-Arbaʿah, vol. 6, p. 317.
7. Muḥaqiq al-Ḥafḍī, Qawāʿid al-ʿAqāʿid, p. 57.
8. Sayyid Sharīf Gurgīnī, Sharḥ al-Mawḥqif, vol. 8, pp. 81-87.
9. Karrāmiyyah: followers of Muḥammad ibn Karrām Sijistīnī (died 255 AH). This sect has subscribed to anthropomorphism and incarnation.
10. Muḥaqiq al-Ḥafḍī, Qawāʿid al-ʿAqāʿid, p. 57; Saʿd al-Dīn Taftāzīnī, Sharḥ al-Maqālāt, vol. 4, p. 128.
11. Abī ʿAbd Allāh ʿUsayn Najjār al-Rāzī (died 320 AH).
12. Muḥaqiq al-Isfahānī or Kampīnī: the author of an important and popular book entitled Nihāyat al-Diriyah, which is a gloss to the treatise Kifāyat al-Uḥḍ by Muḥaqiq Khurāsānī.
13. Nihāyat al-Diriyah, vol. 1, p. 116.
14. ʿAllamah al-Ḥabībī, Nihāyat al-ʿIlm, stage 12, chap. 11; Al-Asfār al-Arbaʿah, vol. 6, pp. 315-316, 353 (ʿAllamah al-Ḥabībī's gloss to Al-Asfār al-Arbaʿah).
15. Shaykh al-Ḥafḍī, Kitāb al-Tawḥīd, section (bāb) on the Attributes of Essence, ʿadth 18.
16. Ibid., ʿadth 17.
17. Ibid., ʿadth 15.
18. Ibid., ʿadth 16.
19. Ibid., section (bāb) on the Divine will and decree, ʿadth 5.
20. Ibid., p. 435.
21. Ibid., pp. 445-454.

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