

Lesson 17: Some Aspects of Inequality

Suppose that the owner of a factory employs both skilled and unskilled workers to operate and administer his factory. When it is time to pay their wages, he pays the skilled and qualified workers, whose job is at a higher level, more than the unskilled workers. Now, is this difference in wages just or unjust? Is the factory owner acting equitably or inequitably?

Doubtless there is a difference involved here, but we cannot call it discrimination. Justice does not require the factory owner to pay unskilled workers the same as skilled workers. It means rather that he should give to each category what it deserves. Such a rule will clearly delineate the comparative value of each job and contribute to the welfare of the workplace.

To make distinctions in such cases is an eloquent and practical form of justice; not to do so would be equivalent to oppression, discrimination and injustice; it would be the result of an inadequate appreciation of the relative value of things in their differentiation.

When we look at the world as a whole and analyze its various parts, we see that each part has its own special position and function and is clothed in the qualities that are suitable to it. In the light of this realization, we can understand the necessity of vicissitudes in human life, of light and darkness, of success and failure, for maintaining the general equilibrium of the world.

If the world were to be uniform, without variation or difference, the varied and multiple species of being would not exist. It is precisely in this abundant variety and multiplicity that do exist that we see the splendor and magnificence of the world. Our judgment of things will be logical, correct, and acceptable when we take into consideration the equilibrium prevailing in the universe and the inter relations that beneficially bind its various parts to each other, not when we examine the part in isolation from the whole.

The order of creation is based on equilibrium, on receptivity and capacities; what is firmly established in creation is differentiation, not discrimination. This observation makes it possible for us to examine the matter more objectively and specifically. Discrimination means making a difference among objects possessing the same receptivity and existing under the same circumstances. Differentiation means

making a difference among capacities that are unequal and not subject to the same circumstances.

It will be erroneous if we say that it would be better for everything in the world to be uniform and undifferentiated, for all the motion, activity and lively interchange we see in the world is made possible by differentiation.

Man has various ways of perceiving and experiencing beauty, once there is a contrast between ugliness and beauty. The attraction exerted by beauty is, in a sense, the reflection of ugliness and its power to repel.

In the same way, if man were not tested and tried in life, piety and virtue would have no value, and there would be no reason to refine one's soul and nothing from which to restrain one's desires.

If a whole canvas is covered in a uniform way, we cannot speak of it being a picture; it is the variation of color and detail that displays the skill of the artist.

In order for the identity of a thing to be known, it is essential that it be differentiated from other things, for the measure by which things or persons are recognized is the outer or inner differences they have with each other.

One of the wonders of creation is the variation in the capacities and gifts with which beings are endowed. In order to ensure the continuance of social life, creation has given each individual a particular set of tastes and capacities, the interplay of which ensures the order of society; each individual meets some of the needs of society and contributes to solving some of its problems.

The natural difference of individuals with respect to capacity causes them to need each other. Everyone takes on some of the tasks of society according to his own taste and capacity, and the social life secured in that way makes it possible for man to progress and advance.

Let us take a building or an airplane as an example. Each of them has numerous separate parts, complex and detailed components that differ greatly from each other in size and form, this difference deriving from the responsibility that each component has toward the whole.

Were this difference not to exist in the structure of the airplane, it would no longer be an airplane but a compound of assorted metals. If differentiation is a sign of true justice in the airplane, it must also be an indication of divine justice among all the creatures of the world including man.

In addition, we must be aware that differentiation among beings is innate to their essence. God does not create everything with a separate and discrete exercise of His will; His will is not exercised individually. The entire world from beginning to end came into being with a single exercise of His will; it was this that enabled creatures in their infinite multiplicity to come into being.

There is, then, a specific law and order that regulates all the dimensions of creation. Within the framework of causality, it assigns a particular rank and position to everything. God's will to create and regulate the world is equivalent to His willing order in it.

There are definite philosophical proofs in support of this proposition, and it is also expounded in the Qur'an:

"We created everything with a certain quantity and limit; Our act is but one, like the blink of an eye." (54:49-50)

It would be wrong to imagine that the differentiation and relations established by God in His creation are the same as the conventional relations existing in human society. God's connection with His creatures is not a mere convention or perceptual matter; it is a connection deriving from the very act of creation. The order that He has placed in all things is the result of His creating it. Every being receives from God the amount of perfection and beauty it is able to receive.

If there were no particular order regulating the world, any being might, in the course of its motions, give rise to any other being, and cause and effect might switch places. But it must be understood that the essential interrelations among things are fixed and necessary; the station and property bestowed on a thing adheres inseparably to it, whatever rank and degree of existence it may have.

No phenomenon can go beyond the degree that has been fixed for it and occupy the degree of another being. Differentiation is a concomitant of the degrees of being, assigning to them differing amounts of weakness and strength, deficiency and perfection.

It would be discrimination if two phenomena had the same capacity to receive perfection but it was given only to one of them and denied to the other.

The degrees of being that exist in the order of creation cannot be compared with the conventional ranks of human society. They are real, not conventional, and not transferable. For example, men and animals cannot change places with each other in the same way that individuals can change the posts and positions they occupy in the relationship connecting each cause with its effect and each effect with its cause derives from the very essences of the cause and effect respectively.

If something is a cause, it is so because of some property that is inseparable from it, and if something is an effect, it is so because of a quality inherent in it, which is nothing other than the mode of its being.

There is, then, an essential and profound order that links all phenomena, and the degree of each phenomenon within the order is identical with its essence. Insofar as differentiation relates to a deficiency in dwelling in the essence, it is not discrimination, because the effusion of God's bounty is not enough for a reality to come into being; the receptivity of the vessel destined to receive the bounty is also necessary.

It is for this reason that certain beings suffer deprivation and do not attain higher degrees; it is impossible that a thing acquire the capacity for being or some other perfection and that God not grant it to it.

The case of numerals is exactly similar each number has its own fixed place. Two comes after one and cannot change places with it. If we change the place of a number, we will have changed its essence at the same time.

It is clear, then, that all phenomena possess fixed ranks and modalities and are subordinate to a series of stable and immutable laws. Divine law naturally does not form a separate created entity, but an abstract concept deduced from the manner in which things are seen to exist. That which has external existence consists of the levels and degrees of being, on the one hand, and the system of cause and effect, on the other. Nothing occurs outside of this system, which is none other than the divine norm mentioned by the Qur'an:

"You will never find any change in the divine norm." (35:43)

The order of creation is based on a series of laws inherent in its essence. The place of every phenomenon within it is clearly defined, and the existence of the various levels and degrees of existence is a necessary consequence of the systematic nature of creation, which inevitably gives rise to variety and differentiation.

Variation and differentiation have not themselves been created, they are the inseparable attributes of all phenomena. Every particle in the universe has received whatever it had the potential to receive; no injustice or discrimination has been visited upon it and the perfection of the universe, resembling a multiplication table in its precise and immutable ordering, has thereby been ensured.

Materialists who regard the existence of variation and differentiation in the natural order as evidence of oppression and injustice and imagine that the world is not ruled by justice will inevitably experience life as difficult, unpleasant, and wearying.

The hasty judgment of the materialist confronted by hardship and difficulty is like the verdict of a child watching a gardener pruning the healthy, green branches of a tree in the spring. Unaware of the purpose and significance of the pruning, the child will think the gardener a destructive and ignorant person.

If all the bounties of the world were placed at the disposal of the materialist, he would still not be content. For once the world is seen to be aimless and based on injustice, it is meaningless for man to seek justice, and in a world that is lacking an aim, it is absurd for man to set himself one.

If the origin and destiny of man are as the materialists depict them, such that he is a grass that grows of itself and then disappears then man must be the most wretched of creatures. For he would be living in a world with which he lacks all affinity, compatibility and harmony. Thought, feeling and emotion would

cause him distress being nothing more than a cruel joke played on him by nature to increase his misery and wretchedness and augment his suffering.

Were a man of initiative and genius to devote himself to the service of humanity, what benefit would it hold for him? Posthumous commemorations and honorings, ceremonies held at his tomb, would not benefit him in the slightest; they would serve only to maintain a hollow legend, because the person in question would have been nothing more than a form assembled by nature for its amusement as a plaything for a few days before being turned into a handful of dust.

If we look at the fate of the majority of people who are constantly struggling with various kinds of sorrow, anxiety, deprivation and failure, the picture grows still more bleak. With such a view of human life, the only paradise materialism has to offer man is a hell of terror and pain. The materialist position that man lacks freedom and choice makes of him an even more wretched creature.

The mono-dimensional worldview of materialism would have it that man is like an automaton, with the mechanism and dynamism of its cells operated by nature. Can human intelligence and instinct, not to mention the realities of existence accept such a banal and petty interpretation of man, his life and his destiny?

Were this interpretation to be true, man would be as incapable of experiencing happiness as a child's doll. Placed in such a situation, man would be compelled to make of his own passions and inclinations the foundation of morality and the yardstick of value, to judge all things according to personal profit and loss. He would do his utmost to destroy every obstacle in his path and loosen all restraints on his carnal desires. Were he to act otherwise, he would be regarded as backward and ignorant.

Anyone who possesses the slightest amount of insight, and judges the matter in a disinterested and dispassionate way, will regard these short-sighted and fantastic notions as valid, however much they be decked out in philosophical and scientific sophistry.

A man with a religious worldview regards the world as an orderly system possessing consciousness, will, perception and aim. The supreme justice-dispensing intelligence of God rules over the universe and every particle of being and watches over all actions and deeds.

A religious man, therefore, feels a sense of responsibility vis-à-vis the consciousness that rules over the world, and knows that a world created and administered by God is necessarily a world of unity, harmony and good. He understands that contradiction and evil have an epiphenomenal existence and play a fundamental role in the achievement of good and the emergence of unity and harmony.

Furthermore, according to this worldview which sketches out broad horizons for man, life is not restricted to this world, and even the life of this world is not restricted to material well-being or freedom from effort and pain. The believer in religion will see the world as a path that must be traversed, as a place of testing, as an arena of effort. In it, the righteousness of men's deeds is tested.

At the beginning of the next life, the good and the evil in the thoughts, beliefs, and actions of men will be measured in the most accurate of balances. God's justice will be revealed in its true aspect, and what ever deprivation man may have suffered in this world, whether material or otherwise, it will be made up to him.

In the light of his destiny that awaits man, and given the essential nullity of the goods of the material world, man orients his conscious striving exclusively to God. His aim becomes to live for Him and to die for Him.

The vicissitudes of this world no longer claim his attention. He sees ephemeral things for what they are, and he allows nothing to seduce his heart. For he knows that the forces of seduction would cause his humanity to wither and draw him down into the whirlpool of materialistic misguidance.

In conclusion, we would add that even apart from the question of receptivity, the existence of difference in the world does not imply injustice. Oppression and injustice mean that someone is subjected to discrimination although he has a claim equal to that of someone else. But beings do not have any "claim" on God nor did they ever, so if some things imply superiority over others this cannot count as injustice.

We have nothing of ourselves: each breath and each heartbeat, each thought and idea that passes through our mind, are taken from a stock that we do not own and have done nothing to build up. That stock is a gift from God, bestowed on us at the moment of birth.

Once we understand that whatever we have is nothing but a divine gift, it will become apparent that the differences among the gifts He gives men are based on His wisdom but have nothing to do with either justice or injustice, because there was no question of any merit or claim on our part.

This finite and temporary life is a gift to us, a present from the Creator. He has absolute discretion in deciding the type and quantity of the gift that He gives, and we have no claim upon Him.

We have, therefore, no right to object even if the gift given us quite free of charge appears slight and inconsequential.

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