

Lesson 20: The Divine Justice and Wisdom

The Literal and Technical Meanings of Justice

In Arabic lexicons, various meanings or usages of ‘*adl*’ (justice) are mentioned, and the most important of them are equilibrium and proportionality, equality and fairness, balance or observance of moderation in the affairs, equality and constancy.¹ In any case, the totality of the said meanings or usages is that every thing must be located in its proper place such that it acquires its due and suitable share from the universe and its excellences and it does not infringe upon the right and share of others.

It can be said, therefore, that the statement of Imām ‘Alī (‘a) in defining justice – “Justice puts things in their places”² – is the most accurate expression in this regard. The expression “to put all things in their proper places and to grant rights to their owners” which the philosophers have used in defining justice³ expresses the said point.

Mawlaw [Rāmā] has expressed the above meaning in the following parable:

ظلم چه بود؟ وضع در ناموضعش عدل چه بود؟ وضع اندر موضعش

ظلم چه بود؟ آب دادن خار را عدل چه بود؟ آب ده اشجار را

What is justice? To put [a thing] in its [right] place.

*What is injustice? To put it in its wrong place.*⁴

What is justice? Giving water to trees.

*What is injustice? To give water to thorns.*⁵

In analyzing the essence of justice, ‘Allāmah al-‘Abbāsī has said:

“The essence of justice is as follows:

إِقَامَةُ الْمُسَاوَاةِ وَالْمُوَازَنَةِ بَيْنَ الْأُمُورِ بِأَنْ يُعْطَى كُلُّ مِّنَ السَّهْمِ مَا يَنْبَغِي أَنْ يُعْطَاهُ. فَيَتَسَاوَى فِي أَنْ كُلًّا مِنْهَا وَقَعَ فِي مَوْضِعِهِ الَّذِي يَسْتَحِقُّهُ.

‘[The essence of justice is] to strike a balance and equilibrium among the things in such a way that the rightful share of each of them is given. As a result, on account of being placed in their right places, all of them are equal.”⁶

The ‘Allāmah has also added, thus:

“It becomes clear from what has been said that justice is concomitant with goodness because goodness and beauty in the things mean that every thing is such that a person is desirous of, and attracted to it. It is evident that putting every thing in its proper place necessitates such beauty.”⁷

Justice in the Parlance of Theologians

The concept of justice in the parlance of theology is that it is God’s Action, and its essence is goodness. That is, the actions of God are all good and desirable, and He will never do anything wicked and undesirable, and He will not abandon that which is necessary and good.

Qṣṣṣ ‘Abd al-Jabbār Mu’tazilī (died 415 AH) has said:

نَحْنُ إِذَا وَصَفْنَا الْقَدِيمَ تَعَالَى بِأَنَّهُ عَدْلٌ حَكِيمٌ، فَالْمُرَادُ بِهِ أَنَّهُ لَا يَفْعَلُ الْقَبِيحَ، أَوْ لَا يَخْتَارُهُ وَ لَا يُخِلُّ بِمَا هُوَ وَاجِبٌ عَلَيْهِ، وَأَنَّ أَفْعَالَهُ كُلَّهَا حَسَنَةٌ.

“Whenever we describe the Eternal and Exalted as just and wise, we mean that He does not do anything abominable. He does not abandon (through bias and prejudice) that which is necessary for Him, and everything He does is good.”⁸

In this regard, Shaykh Sayyid al-Dīn al-Ḥamaḍī (died 6th century AH) has said:

أَلْكَلَامُ فِي الْعَدْلِ كَلَامٌ فِي أَفْعَالِهِ تَعَالَى، وَأَنَّهَا كُلُّهَا حَسَنَةٌ وَتَنْزِيهِهِ عَنِ الْقَبَائِحِ وَعَنِ الْإِخْلَالِ بِالْوَاجِبِ فِي حِكْمَتِهِ.

“The statement about justice is a statement about the actions of the Exalted, and all of them are good and immune from the abominable things, and He does not abandon that which is considered necessary by His wisdom.”⁹

Ḥakīm Lḥijjī has also said:

“What is meant by justice is to describe the Essence of the Necessary Being with the good and beautiful action and to free Him from an act of injustice and abomination. In sum, just as the Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*) is the necessary perfection in the Divine Essence and Attributes, the Divine Justice (*‘adl*) is the necessary perfection in the Divine Actions.”¹⁰

Other justice-oriented (*‘adliyyah*) theologians have also used similar expressions in defining justice.

The justice-oriented theologians (Shāḥ and Muṭazilah) acknowledge that in matters related to the Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*) and justice (*‘adl*), they are all indebted to Imām ‘Alī (‘a). The definition they have given for the Divine justice is actually taken from the statement of the Imām (‘a) in this regard. When the Imām (‘a) was asked about the Divine Unity and justice, he replied:

الْتَوْحِيدُ أَلَّا تَتَوَهَّمَهُ، وَالْعَدْلُ أَلَّا تَتَّهَمَهُ.

“Unity means that you do not subject Him to the limitations of your imagination and justice means that you do not lay any blame on Him.”¹¹

Similar to this statement has been reported from Imām al-ḥadiq (‘a). For example, he has said:

أَمَّا التَّوْحِيدُ فَأَن لَّا تُجَوِّزَ عَلَى خَالِقِكَ مَا جَازَ عَلَيْكَ، وَأَمَّا الْعَدْلُ فَأَن لَّا تُنْسِبَ إِلَى خَالِقِكَ مَا لَمْ يَكُ عَلَيْهِ.

“Unity means that you do not attribute to Him attributes of defect and deficiency which are applicable to you and justice means that you do not attribute to Him anything which is unacceptable for Him to do to you.”¹²

The Literal and Technical Meaning of Wisdom

In lexical usages, *ḥikmah* (wisdom) is understood to mean firmness and prevention of defect, damage and destruction. For instance, the rein of the horse is called *ḥakamah* because it prevents the horse from insubordination and inharmonious acts. The lawyer is called *mawḥ* and *ḥikim* because he prevents the legally responsible adult (*mukallaf*) from doing unlawful acts. The judge is called *ḥikim* because he prevents the abuse and violation of the rights of individuals. Theoretical affirmation is called *ḥukm* because it removes doubt and skepticism in the mind.

Whenever a thing has firmness and stability, it is immune from damage. The word *ḥikmah* (wisdom), therefore, is concomitant with constancy, firmness and strength – be it theoretically or practically.¹³

Wisdom in the Parlance of Theologians

The word *ʿikmah* in theological discourses is used to mean both theoretical and practical wisdom.

1. Theoretical Wisdom

Theoretical wisdom means the highest degree of knowledge about the most sublime subject whose manifestation is the knowledge of God concerning His Essence and Actions.

إِنَّ الْحِكْمَةَ عِبَارَةٌ عَنْ مَعْرِفَةِ أَفْضَلِ الْمَعْلُومَاتِ بِأَفْضَلِ الْعُلُومِ، فَالْحَكِيمُ بِمَعْنَى الْعَلِيمِ.

“Wisdom is indeed to know the best of things to be known by the best of knowledge. So, the wise (*ʿakīm*) means the knowledgeable (*ʿalīm*).”¹⁴

2. Practical Wisdom

Wisdom in this sense has the following usages:

(1) Firmness in action. For instance, Al-Rāzī has said:

وَمَعْنَى الْإِحْكَامِ فِي حَقِّ اللَّهِ تَعَالَى فِي خَلْقِ الْأَشْيَاءِ إِتْقَانُ التَّدْبِيرِ فِيهَا وَحُسْنُ التَّقْدِيرِ لَهَا.

“And the meaning of *ʿikmah* with respect to Allah, the Exalted, in the creation of the things is the firmness of control over it and the excellence of decree for it.”¹⁵

This holy verse provides this meaning of *ʿikmah*:

﴿الَّذِي أَحْسَنَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقَهُ﴾

“[It is He] who perfected everything that He created.”¹⁶

(2) The Agent’s immunity from abominable and undue acts. In this regard, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī has said:

الثَّالِثُ: الْحِكْمَةُ عِبَارَةٌ عَنْ كَوْنِهِ مُقَدَّسًا عَنْ فِعْلٍ مَا لَا يَنْبَغِي.

“The third meaning of *ʿikmah* is to consider Him immune from any undue act.”

He has then cited the following verses as his basis:

﴿ أَفَحَسِبْتُمْ أَنَّمَا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ عَبَثًا وَأَنَّكُمْ إِلَيْنَا لَا تُرْجَعُونَ ﴾

“Did you suppose that We created you aimlessly, and that you will not be brought back to Us?”¹⁷

﴿ وَمَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَاءَ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا بَاطِلًا ﴾

“We did not create the sky and the earth and whatever is between them in vain.”¹⁸

(3) The actions of God as having purposes. Fakḥm Lḥḥ has allocated the fifth chapter of the discourses on the Divine justice to the discussion on the Divine wisdom, saying thus:

“Know that if the actions of God, the Exalted, were without any purpose, they must be futile and for anything futile to emanate from the Necessary Being is impossible.”

Conclusion

From what has been said about the essence of justice and wisdom in the parlance of the theologians, we arrive at the conclusion that in theology, the usages of wisdom (*ḥikmah*) are more common than the usages of justice (*‘adl*) because wisdom also encompasses knowledge while justice pertains to the actions of God.

Meanwhile, the third usage of wisdom in theology is equal to the meaning of justice in theology because the implication of both is that the actions of God are immune from any form of abomination and repulsiveness. In other words, both meanings are related to the realm of practical reason; that is, they encompass the realm of the do’s and don’ts. As such, the usages of wisdom in the realm of the actions of God are more common than the usages of justice in theology.

Yes, wisdom in the sense of firmness and constancy in action can somehow be traced back to wisdom in the sense of immunity of action from whatever is impermissible. This is because the lack of firmness and constancy of action is also unacceptable to a knowledgeable, capable and wise agent. For instance, wisdom in the sense of existence of purpose in an action is also a manifestation of the third meaning (immunity from any abominable action).

This relationship and attachment between justice and wisdom in theology has prompted the theologians to usually use the two terms interchangeably and to mention them together in the discourse on the Divine justice. The expression *al-‘adl* (justice) is common and prevalent among the theologians.

Manifestations of the Divine Justice and Wisdom

The general manifestations of the Divine justice and wisdom are as follows:

1. Justice and wisdom in the creation and management [of the universe]

This means that God has created every being by considering its essential potential and capability, and according to the intended goal of each creature, He has provided it with the necessary means and conditions to attain that goal. This holy verse speaks of this point:

﴿رَبُّنَا الَّذِي أَعْطَى كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلْقَهُ ثُمَّ هَدَى﴾

“Our Lord is He who gave everything its creation and then guided it.”¹⁹

So is this holy verse:

﴿الَّذِي خَلَقَ فَسَوَّى * وَالَّذِي قَدَّرَ فَهَدَى﴾

“[It is He] who created and proportioned, who determined and guided.”²⁰

It is thus stated in a famous Prophetic tradition:

بِالْعَدْلِ قَامَتِ السَّمَاوَاتُ وَالْأَرْضُ

“The heavens and the earth were established by justice.”

2. Justice and wisdom in legislation

God has provided the creatures which are capable of receiving rational and spiritual perfections with religious forms of guidance and taught them the religious precepts, laws and teachings which guarantee their needs and nourish their aptitudes through reason and revelation. Another point is that legislation and lawmaking, the capability and potential of the human being is taken into account and no obligation beyond the human capability is imposed. These two points are also declared in Qur’anic verses.

3. Justice and wisdom in giving recompense and penalty

That is, on the basis of justice and wisdom, God gives punishment and He does not also deprive the good goers of their rewards in the least. He bestows them whatever is due to them and He has promised to them:

﴿وَنَضَعُ الْمَوَازِينَ الْقِسْطَ لِيَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ فَلَا تُظْلَمُ نَفْسٌ شَيْئًا﴾

“We shall set up the scale of justice on the Day of Resurrection, and no soul will be wronged in

***the least.*”[21](#)**

The word *qis* (justice) in this holy verse encompasses all the manifestations and expressions of ‘*adl* and *qis*:

﴿شَهِدَ اللَّهُ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ وَأُولُوا الْعِلْمِ قَائِمًا بِالْقِسْطِ﴾

“Allah bears witness that there is no god but Him—and [so do] the angels and those who possess knowledge—maintainer of justice.”[22](#)

For instance, one of the statements made by ‘Allāmah ḥabars[23](#) in interpreting the said verse is that God takes control of the creation (cosmically and legislatively) and gives reward for the deeds done on the basis of justice.[24](#)

What have been said are the general manifestations and expressions of the Divine justice and in other perspectives such as that of the Holy Qur’an on the concept of justice. Other cases which are within the functions of the abovementioned manifestations can also be enumerated. After quoting the verses of the Holy Qur’an pertaining to justice in the different fields, Professor Muḥahhar has said:

“In the Qur’an, from the Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*) to the Resurrection (*ma‘ād*); from prophethood (*nubuwwah*) to Imamate (*imāmah*) and leadership; from personal ideals to social goals, all of these are founded upon and revolve around the principle of justice. The Qur’anic justice is the counterpart of *tawḥīd*, the cornerstone of *ma‘ād*, the objective of the legislation of the prophets, the philosophy behind leadership and Imamate, the criterion for individual perfection, and the barometer of social wellbeing.”[25](#)

The History and Motive for Discussing Justice

In Islamic theology, the issue of the Divine justice has an ancient history and it can be said that it has been discussed from the earliest days of the Prophetic mission. In the traditions (*ahādīth*) and conduct (*sīrah*) of the Holy Prophet (ﷺ), it has been given considerable attention. Even dialogues about it between followers of other religions and the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) had even taken place.

For instance, Shaykh al-ḥadīq has narrated[26](#) that one day a Jewish man came to the Prophet (ﷺ) and they discussed many things including the justice of God. He asked the Prophet (ﷺ), thus: “Does your God commit injustice?” The Prophet (ﷺ) replied, “No.” The Jew asked, “What is the reason?” The Prophet (ﷺ) retorted,

لِعِلْمِهِ بِقُبْحِهِ وَاسْتِغْنَائِهِ عَنْهُ.

“It is because He knows the repulsiveness of injustice and He has no need for it.”

The Jew asked again, “Has God revealed anything [to you] in this regard?” The Prophet (ﷺ) answered, “Yes.” He then recited the following Qur’anic verses:

﴿وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِظَلَّامٍ لِلْعَبِيدِ﴾

“And your Lord is not tyrannical to the servants.”²⁷

﴿إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَظْلِمُ النَّاسَ شَيْئًا وَلَكِنَّ النَّاسَ أَنْفُسُهُمْ يَظْلِمُونَ﴾

“Indeed Allah does not wrong people in the least; rather it is people who wrong themselves.”²⁸

﴿وَمَا اللَّهُ يُرِيدُ ظُلْمًا لِلْعَالَمِينَ﴾

“And Allah does not desire any wrong for the creatures.”²⁹

﴿وَمَا اللَّهُ يُرِيدُ ظُلْمًا لِلْعِبَادِ﴾

“And Allah does not desire any wrong for (His) servants.”³⁰

After the time of the Prophet (ﷺ) (i.e. during the time of the caliphs), the issue of the justice of God was also a subject of discussions and discourses, and as the highest intellectual and theological personality [during his time], Imam ‘Alī (‘a) used to reply to the questions in this regard and through his close supervision and astute guidance, he would try to prevent any form of deviation from this principle. His discourses on the questions of pretermination and free-will are a testimony to these assertions.

After this period, a new chapter in the history of Islamic theology was opened. The proliferation of different thoughts and ideas as a result of the geographical expansion of the Muslim domain and their interaction with different cultures, on one hand, and the atmosphere of political strangulation during the Umayyad period which led to the severance of communication between the people at large and the Household of Revelation and Apostleship, on the other hand, resulted in the emergence of various sects and the presentation of diverse viewpoints on ideological issues including the justice of God. Hasan al-Baṣrī (died 110 AH), who at that time was known as one of the leading thinkers in the Muslim world, was inclined toward the notion of *jabr* (fatalism or compulsion) (in contrast to the notion of *tafwīḍ*),³¹ in a bid to defend the justice of God. He said, “Everything is subject to the Divine decree and predestination except sins.”³²

Qadariyyah (fatalists) also subscribed to this belief. After the Qadariyyah it was the Mu‘tazilah’s turn. With the aim also of defending the justice and wisdom of God, the Mu‘talizah advocated the notion of

tafwāḥ.

During this period, the Imams from the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) – notwithstanding the restrictions imposed upon them by the Umayyad political establishment – embarked on correctly explaining the justice of God, thereby refuting the notion of *tafwāḥ* as well as that of *jabr*. Their outstanding students such as Hisham ibn al-ʿAkam³³ and others had also left no stone unturned in propagating the views of the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a).

In accordance with the approach and bases they had adopted the Sunnī Ahl al-ʿAdith would also avoid entering in theological disputes, sufficing themselves with criticism and indeterminism. In any case, they had no specific theological position on the Divine justice, but after Abū 'l-ʿĀsan al-Ashʿarī embarked on defending their beliefs, they adopted certain theological approaches, and this led to a new development in theological discussions including the issue of the justice of God.

In sum, the issue of the Divine justice has been always a focus of attention and a subject of discussion, and the theological debates in this regard has an ancient history, and the motive behind these discussions is to purge the actions of God from abominable and undue things.

The Position of Justice in 'Adliyyah Theology

Although all Muslims believe in the justice of God and regard this issue as one of the essentials of Islam, the rationalists as well as the literalists would interpret the justice of God in their own particular way. The rationalists who have interpreted it on the basis of rational good and evil would regard themselves as the real proponents and defenders of the Divine justice and treat those who deny rational good and evil as genuine deniers of justice. As such, they have set justice as one of the principles of their respective schools of thought. Justice is also considered one of the basic principles of the Religion by both the Muʿtazilah and the Imamiyyah. For this reason, these two schools of theology are called '*adliyyah* (justice-oriented).

Regarding the importance of the principle of justice, 'Allamah al-ʿIllī³⁴ has said:

إِعْلَمُ أَنَّ هَذَا أَصْلٌ عَظِيمٌ تَبَتَّنَى عَلَيْهِ الْقَوَاعِدُ الْإِسْلَامِيَّةُ بَلِ الْأَحْكَامُ الدِّيْنِيَّةُ مُطْلَقاً.

“Know that this principle is an important principle on which the Islamic rules as well as the religious laws absolutely stand.”³⁵

In this regard, Professor Muḥahhar³⁶ has also said, thus:

“Although the principle of justice is part of the principles of beliefs as it is one of the accepted concepts and essentials of religion, in the sense that in the Muʿtazilah and Shāʿah schools of thought it is considered part and parcel of their five principles, it is regarded as the hallmark of their schools of

thought.”³⁶

Review Questions

1. State the literal and technical meanings of ‘*adl*’ (justice).
2. State the meaning of ‘*adl*’ in the parlance of the theologians.
3. Explain *‘ikmah* (wisdom) from the literal and technical perspective.
4. For the theologians, what is the meaning of *‘ikmah*?
5. Briefly state the general manifestations of the Divine justice and wisdom.
6. State the motive for discussing the justice of God.
7. Write down the status of justice in the justice-oriented (*‘adliyyah*) theology.

1. Al-Mi‘tibā‘ al-Mun‘ir, pp. 51–52; Aqrab al-Maw‘rid, vol. 2, p. 753; Al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur’ān, p. 325.

2. Nahj al-Balāghah, Saying 437.

3. Fakḥm Sabziwārī, Sharḥ al-Asmā’ al-‘usnā, p. 54.

4. Nicholson (trans.), Mathnawī-ye Ma’nawī, Book 6, line 2596, p. 293.

5. Ibid., Book 5, line 1089, p. 67.

6. Al-Mu‘azzan fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān, vol. 12, p. 331.

7. Ibid.

8. Sharḥ Uṣūl al-Khamsah, p. 203.

9. Al-Munqadh min al-Taqlīd, vol. 1, p. 150.

10. Sarmayeh-ye ‘imān, section (bāb) 2.

11. Nahj al-Balāghah, Saying 470. Regarding the commentary on this saying of Imām ‘Alī (‘a), it is appropriate to refer to Ibn al-‘adād and Ibn Maytham al-Ba‘rānī’s commentary on Nahj al-Balāghah.

12. Shaykh al-‘adāq, Al-Tawḥīd, p. 96.

13. Al-Mi‘tibā‘ al-Mun‘ir, vol. 1, p. 178; Al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur’ān, p. 136; Al-Mun‘ir, vol. 7, p. 254.

14. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Sharḥ Asmā’ Allāhi ‘l-‘usnā, pp. 279–280.

15. Ibid.

16. Sūrat al-Sajdah 32:7.

17. Sūrat al-Mu’minīn 23:115.

18. Sūrat ‘ad 38:27.

19. Sūrat ‘ad 38:20:50.

20. Sūrat al-A‘raf 87:2–3.

21. Sūrat al-Anbiyā’ 21:47.

22. Sūrat al-‘Imrān 3:18.

23. Abū ‘Alī Faḥl ibn ‘asan al-‘abarsī (died 548 AH/1153): a great Shā‘ah exegete (mufasssīr), man of letters, philologist and mathematician of the sixth century AH. He studied under Shaykh ‘asan ibn Shaykh al-‘asī and ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Rāzī and trained many students including his son Rāḥ al-Dīn al-‘abarsī (the author of the book Makrīm al-Akhīq), Ibn Shahr ṣhāb, Shaykh Muntajab al-Dīn, and Quṭb al-Dīn Rāwḥandī. He is the author of more than 20 works including Majmū‘ al-Bayān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān (Compendium of Elucidations on the Exegesis of the Quran), Jawāmi‘ al-Jam‘ and ‘Ilām al-War‘ bi ‘Alam al-Hudā. [Trans.]

- [24.](#) Majma' al-Bayān, vol. 1, p. 420.
- [25.](#) 'Adl-e Ilāhī (Divine Justice), p. 42.
- [26.](#) Al-Tawḥīd, pp. 397–398.
- [27.](#) Sūrat Fuṣṣilat 41:46.
- [28.](#) Sūrat Yūnus 10:44.
- [29.](#) Surat Al 'Imran 3:108.
- [30.](#) Sūrat Ghāfir (or al-Mu'min) 40:31.
- [31.](#) Tafwīḍ: the belief that after creating all beings, God has left them to administer their own affairs and follow their own wills. In other words, it is the upholding of absolutist freewill (ikhtiyār) vis-à-vis predestination. [Trans.]
- [32.](#) Quoted in Sayyid Murtaḍā, Al-Amḍī, vol. 1, p. 106.
- [33.](#) Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam (died 199 AH) of Kāfah was a well-known companion of Imām al-Ḥadiq and Imām Kāḥim ('a) who would frequently express their admiration for him. He was so strong in proving theological subjects especially the ones related to the issue of Imamate that many would avoid engaging in a debate with him. Moreover, he wrote many books but none of which has survived. [Trans.]
- [34.](#) 'Allāmah al-Ḥillī, more fully 'Allāmah ibn al-Muḥahhar al-Ḥillī (1250–1325): one of the prominent Shā'ah scholars who lived in the period of Mongol domination of Iran. [Trans.]
- [35.](#) Nahj al-Ḥaqq wa Kashf al-Ḥidq, p. 72.
- [36.](#) Ḥashin' b' 'Ulūm-e Islām (Kalām wa 'Irfān), p. 25, with a slight modification.

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