

Lesson 21: Rational Goodness and Evil

The principle of rational goodness and evil has a prominent position in the justice-oriented (*'adliyyah*) theology and is regarded as the foundation and bedrock of the discussions on justice in Islamic theology. For this reason, at the beginning of their discussion on the justice of God, the justice-oriented theologians would deal first with this principle.

An Elucidation of the Rule of Rational Goodness and Evil

The rule of rational good and evil has two connotations:

1. The actions done by conscious and independent agents have one of the two states: either they have the quality of good or evil (state of affirmation).
2. The human intellect can independently discern the goodness or wickedness of some actions (state of demonstration).

Let us explain the first connotation. Two types of labels can be given to human actions, viz. primary and secondary labels. The primary labels differentiate actions from one another in the creational perspective; for example, labels such as eating, drinking, standing sitting, speaking, moving, pausing, and the like do not describe actions as good or bad, and they only have creational goodness. Secondary labels are labels which are derived from the primary labels and on the basis of which, actions are described as good or bad; for example, labels such as justice, injustice, honesty, lying, word of honor, breaking of promise, loyalty to one's oath, disloyalty, and the like.

On account of being the origin of the actions' descriptions as good or bad, these labels are also called *muqasssin* (bestower of goodness) and *muqabbbi* (evil-generator), and the intrinsic goodness and evil are related to these labels, and not to the primary labels.

Therefore, rational good and evil implies that firstly, in terms of reason, the actions of conscious and independent agents have the quality of goodness or evil while considering their secondary labels. Secondly, the human intellect can independently discern some of these good and wicked acts while

others can be known through revelation and religion.

Theoretical Reason and Practical Intellect

‘Aql/ (reason or intellect) is derived from ‘aqḥ/ al-ba‘ḥr. ‘Aqḥ/ al-ba‘ḥr is the camel’s shackle or the rope tied to the camel’s front legs to keep it in its place. Headband is called ‘aqḥ/. Therefore, intellect is the faculty which prevents the human being from digressing from the path of moderation. Of course, the intellect’s deterrence function is only to the extent of discernment and judgment and not in actual prevention. What the intellect discerns are of two types:

1. It is beyond the domain of the human want and ability, such as rational pieces of knowledge and perceptions related to the world of nature or the metaphysical world. This type of knowledge which is related to worldview is called “theoretical wisdom” and whenever it is attributed to the intellect, it is called “theoretical intellect”.
2. It is within the domain of the human liberty and free-will; that is, the voluntary actions of the human being. This type of knowledge which is related to ideology is called “practical wisdom”, and whenever it is attributed to the intellect, it is called “practical intellect”.

The intellectual faculty, therefore, is one thing and its role is to know and perceive, but its perceptual data are of two types. Some are related to worldview, and knowledge and discernment by themselves are desirable (theoretical perceptions). On this basis, the intellect is called “theoretical intellect”. Others are related to ideology, and knowledge and gnosis are a prelude to action (practical perceptions). On this basis, the intellect is called “practical intellect”. In the discussion on the rational good and evil, what is meant is the practical intellect. [1](#)

The Affirmers and Negationists

The Imḥamiyyah and Mu‘tazilah theologians are among the strong supporters of rational good and evil. They are of the opinion that the Divine justice cannot be interpreted except on the basis of this principle, and denial of this principle is considered tantamount to the denial of the justice of God.

As such, they have taken the Divine justice as one of the principles of their respective schools of thought through which they convey to others that they are the only ones who recognize the justice of God. As we have mentioned earlier, the justice-oriented theologians have engaged in proving rational good and evil at the beginning of the discussion on the Divine justice.

‘Allḥmah al-ḥillḥ (died 726 AH) says, “The Imḥamiyyah and Mu‘tazilah are of the opinion that the goodness and wickedness of some actions can be clearly and axiomatically discerned by the intellect.” [2](#)

Aḥmad Amḥn al-Miḥrḥ writes, “Since the Mu‘tazilah have regarded God as just and wise, they have put forth the issue of the goodness and evil of actions.” [3](#)

Apart from the Imāmiyyah and Mu'tazilah, the Māturidiyyah have also acknowledged [rational] goodness or evil [of actions]. For instance, Taftazānī (died 793 AH) has said:

“Some Sunnīs, that is, the ʿanafīs, are of the opinion that the goodness and evil of some actions can be perceived by the intellect; for example, the obligatoriness of the first obligation, the mandatoriness of affirming the Prophet (ﷺ) and the unlawfulness of rejecting him.”⁴

The Ashʿīrah are among the main rejectors of the principle of rational goodness and evil. In principle, all those who do not accept and give importance to reason and rational knowledge also do not believe in rational goodness and evil.

On this basis, the Ahl al-ʿadāth from among the Sunnīs and the Akhbārīs from among the Shāʿah also reject rational goodness and evil. Of course, some Akhbārīs have acknowledged decrees of the intellect in self-evident premises (*badhiyyāt*), and in other than the self-evident premises, they have recognized the sacred law (*sharʿ*) as the way of perceiving the truths (both theoretical and practical).⁵

Appreciation and Condemnation, Reward and Punishment

The concepts of appreciation and condemnation, reward and punishment are among the concepts discussed in the issue of rational goodness or evil. In this regard, the Ashʿarīs have said:

“What we reject in this issue is for us to regard as good action the action which deserves appreciation in this world and reward in the Hereafter and for us to consider evil action the action which deserves condemnation in this world and punishment in the Hereafter. However, we do not deny the fact that on account of being a quality of perfection or defect, an action is rational, appreciated, or condemned. We are also of the opinion that knowledge is a perfection of the self and a knowledgeable person is worthy of praise while ignorance is a defect and an ignorant person is blameworthy. Yet, that being deserves reward in the Hereafter while ignorance warrants punishment in the Hereafter cannot be known except through the sacred law.”

On the contrary, the justice-oriented schools of theology are of the opinion that the nature of appreciation and reward, and that of condemnation and punishment is the same. Appreciation and reward pertain to the recompense of good while condemnation and chastisement pertain to the recompense of evil. But whenever the recompense of good or evil comes from a person, it is called appreciation or condemnation, and whenever it emanates from God, it is called reward or punishment. Shaykh Muḥammad Taqī al-ʿIḥfāḥī has said, “Appreciation, reward and desirability of an action are synonymous, just as condemnation, punishment and undesirability of an action also give a common meaning.”⁶

ʿAkīm Lāhijī also writes, thus:

“Know that a voluntary action is to be described as good or bad, such as justice and kindness, or

injustice and hostility, and there is no doubt that the meaning of the goodness of justice, for instance, is that its doer merits appreciation and acknowledgment and deserves good recompense. Since the good recompense comes from God, the Exalted, it is called reward (*thawāb*). In the same manner, the meaning of the evil of injustice, for instance, is that its doer is worthy of condemnation and blame and incurs evil recompense. And since evil recompense emanates from God, the Exalted, it is called punishment (*ʿiqāb*).”⁷

It is noteworthy that as far as the actions of God are concerned, appreciation and condemnation can be assumed but reward and punishment cannot be. Of course, regarding appreciation and condemnation, what can be materialized with respect to the actions of God are indeed appreciation and praise, because an evil act does not emanate from Him. As a matter of fact, all His actions are good, and this is the very implication of justice.⁸

Incumbent upon Allah

One of the concepts dealt with in the discussion on rational goodness and evil is the concept of *wujūb* *ʿalā* *ʾIlāh* (incumbent upon Allah), because those who affirm rational goodness and evil consider it incumbent upon Allah to do good, and they say, for example, that commissioning of the prophets is incumbent upon Him, or to fulfill what He has promised to His servants is incumbent upon Him.

The rejectors of rational goodness and evil strongly opposed this terminology, saying that this necessitates the human being’s authority over God so that he could impose certain things to Him, and if this premise is invalid, it follows that rational goodness and evil is also invalid.⁹

In reply, the justice-oriented theologians have said:

“[The concept of] ‘incumbent upon Allah’ on the issue of rational goodness and evil does not mean ‘incumbency’ (*wujūb*) in the parlance of jurisprudence so as to entail such an incorrect premise. Instead, this *wujūb* means that since God is free from any form of flaw and defect in His Essence and Attributes, the concomitance to the perfection of His Essence and Attributes is that His action is also free from any form of flaw and defect.

Wujūb *ʿalā* *ʾIlāh* means the concomitance of perfection in the Essence and Attributes to the perfection in action, and the role of the intellect in this issue is to know and perceive and not to reward and validate. The intellect does not impose the performance of something on God but rather perceives its being incumbent. The source of error of the Ashʿarīs, therefore, is that they have regarded theological incumbency as identical with juristic incumbency, and have been negligent of their literal commonality.”¹⁰

Shaykh Muḥammad ʿAbduh (died 1323 AH) has also paid attention to the incorrectness of this Ashʿarī view, saying thus:

The *Salaf al-ṣāliḥīn* (Pious Predecessors) School is of the opinion that nothing is incumbent upon God except that which He Himself has made incumbent, and that which He Himself has made incumbent is that which is demanded by His Attributes of Perfection. Just as reason dictates that it is essential for God to be described with the Attributes of Perfection, for Him to be described with the concepts attached to those Attributes such as justice, wisdom and mercy is also incumbent. But this incumbency does not emanate from anybody other than God because there is no sovereign above His sovereignty. However, the Ashʿarīs would quote the Muʿtazilīs in such a way that it is as if they have regarded God as duty-bound and obliged, whereas they do not hold such a belief.”¹¹

The Proofs Substantiating Rational Goodness and Evil

The justice-oriented theologians have put forth many proofs to prove rational goodness and evil,¹² but we shall only suffice ourselves with the following three proofs:

1. Those who do not believe in the heavenly laws also acknowledge rational goodness and evil such as justice and injustice, beneficence and enmity, honesty and dishonesty. If the source of belief in the goodness and evil of actions were only limited to the Sacred Law (*sharʿ*), belief in the goodness and evil of actions would have been limited only to the followers of religious laws. Moreover, customs and traditions of nations and communities also differ from one another.
2. Their acknowledgment of the goodness and evil of the said actions, therefore, originates from their nature or disposition, and since nature or disposition is universal, the goodness and evil of actions are also universal. Of course, considering that the intellect’s perception and power of judgment are limited, the goodness and evil of so many actions become clear through the Sacred Law, and those things are not acknowledged by all nations and communities.¹³
3. Rejection of rational goodness and evil also necessitates rejection of religiously-recognized goodness and evil. As a result, the goodness and evil of actions will be totally rejected as well because religiously-recognized goodness and evil are based upon the principle that we are assured of the certainty of the Prophet’s saying as God-inspired and there is no possibility of being a lie, whereas in such rejection, the possibility of being a lie is entertained. In order to disprove this possibility, one cannot cite any saying of the Prophet (ﷺ) as a lie because it will amount to vicious cycle of arguments; hence, the goodness or evil of no action can ever be proved although the existence of goodness and evil is acknowledged by everybody.
4. Since rejection of rational goodness and evil, therefore, necessitates impossibility (total rejection of what is good and evil), it follows that it is invalid. As such, rational goodness and evil are hereby established. Muḥaqqiq al-Ṣāḥib has expressed this argument in the following words:

وَلِإِتِّفَاقِهِمَا مُطْلَقاً لَوْ ثَبَتَا شَرْعاً

That is, if the proof of goodness and evil is only religious (*sharʿī*), goodness and evil will totally be extinguished. [14](#)

By rejecting rational goodness and evil, the way to determine the truthfulness of a claim to prophethood (*nubuwwah*) will be closed, and thus the sending of prophets for the guidance of humanity will be futile, because the way of determining the truthfulness of the claimant to prophethood is the presentation of a Divine miracle (*muʿjizah*).

Citing *muʿjizah* to substantiate the truthfulness of one's claim to prophethood depends on the principle that bestowing *muʿjizah* to a liar is evil, and on the basis of the principle that God is immune from any form of undue acts, it is hereby established that the presenter of *muʿjizah* in claiming prophethood is truthful. [15](#)

In rejecting this argument, some Ashʿarīs have said: “Entrusting *muʿjizah* to liars, though rationally not impossible, is contrary to God's way (*ʿadat Allāh*), for His way and style is not to entrust *muʿjizah* to the liars.” [16](#)

It must be asked, “How do we identify *ʿadat Allāh* and on which basis can one acquire such knowledge?” If it means induction (*istiqrāʾ*) and study of the biography of the prophets, firstly, useful induction is not certainty (*yaqīn*) so as for it to be cited on the issue of prophethood which is based upon certainty; secondly, it cannot be implemented with respect to the pioneering prophets. In this case, the rejectors of the pioneering prophets would have been excused because they would still have not known through induction the *ʿadat Allāh* regarding the sending of the prophets!

Rational Goodness and Evil in the Qur'an and the Traditions

Many proofs and pieces of evidence of rational goodness and evil can be found in the Holy Qur'an and traditions (*aḥādīth*), some of which we shall mention below:

1. The Holy Qur'an has explicitly stated that although they did not believe in the law of Islam, the polytheists during the time of the Prophet (ﷺ) would acknowledge the wickedness of their practices, and whenever they would be subject to complaint, they would justify these as practices of their forefathers and these were consistent with the Divine command. In refuting their notion, the Qur'an says, “God does not order anything indecent; so, why do you attribute to Him something which you do not know?” For instance, it thus states:

وَإِذَا فَعَلُوا فَاحِشَةً قَالُوا وَجَدْنَا عَلَيْهَا آبَاءَنَا وَاللَّهُ أَمَرَنَا بِهَا قُلْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَأْمُرُ بِالْفَحْشَاءِ أَتَقُولُونَ عَلَى اللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٠١﴾

“When they commit an indecency, they say, ‘We found our fathers practicing it, and Allah has

enjoined it upon us.’ Say, ‘Indeed Allah does not enjoin indecencies. Do you attribute to Allah what you do not know?’”¹⁷

The implication of this verse that some actions are inherently deemed evil, and the human intellect can discern their evil and wickedness is clear. Apart from the justice-oriented theologians who have such understanding of the verse, the author of *Al-Manṣūr* has also said:

“This verse is against those who, with the motive of opposing those who have gone to extremes with respect to the dictate of the intellect in what is good and evil, have totally rejected goodness and evil in religious laws.”¹⁸

2. In condemning polytheism (*shirk*), the Holy Qur’an considers it a great injustice (ʿuḥm); that is, it explains the evil of polytheism as a great injustice:

﴿وَإِذْ قَالَ لُقْمَانُ لِابْنِهِ وَهُوَ يَعِظُهُ يَا بُنَيَّ لَا تُشْرِكْ بِاللَّهِ إِنَّ الشِّرْكَ لَظُلْمٌ عَظِيمٌ﴾

“When Luqman said to his son, as he advised him: ‘O my son! Do not ascribe any partners to Allah. Polytheism is indeed a great injustice.’”¹⁹

3. The Holy Qur’an calls to mind that the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) is commanded to enjoin the people to do what is good and to forbid what is evil; that is, actions are either inherently good or evil, and the Divine command or prohibition depend on their nature:

﴿يَأْمُرُهُم بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَاهُمْ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُحِلُّ لَهُمُ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَيُحَرِّمُ عَلَيْهِمُ الْخَبَائِثَ﴾

“[It is he] who bids them to do what is right and forbids them from what is wrong, makes lawful to them all the good things and forbids them from all vicious things.”²⁰

4. For this reason, the Holy Qur’an regards the Day of Judgment as necessary and negation of it is tantamount to the futility of the [entire process of] creation. That is, it considers self-evident the ugliness of a futile act, and on the basis that God is free from any futile act, it argues for the need for the Day of Judgment:

﴿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?”²¹

Apart from these verses that indicate rational goodness and evil, many verses which express the purpose and philosophy behind the Divine laws and actions also prove this point.

An explanation of the laws and the philosophy behind them makes it crystal clear that the Divine laws follow a set of real and innate criteria, and this is the basic foundation of the “rational goodness and evil” rule (*qaw'idah*).

The purposes and philosophy behind the Divine laws are also mentioned in traditions. The book *'Ilal al-Shari'ah* (*Reasons behind the Divine Laws*) by Shaykh al-Qadiri contains some of these traditions.[22](#)

Review Questions

1. State the meaning of the “rational goodness and evil” rule (*qaw'idah*).
2. Explain the theoretical and practical intellect.
3. State the viewpoint of the Imami and Mu'tazili theologians regarding rational goodness and evil.
4. Explain the concepts of appreciation and condemnation as well as reward and punishment according to the justice-oriented (*'adliyyah*) theologians.
5. State the opinion of those who affirm goodness and evil concerning “incumbency upon Allah” (*wujub 'ala 'illah*).
6. Write down the first proof of rational goodness and evil.
7. State the second proof of rational goodness and evil.
8. Explain the third proof of rational goodness and evil.
9. Keeping in view a Qur'anic verse, explain rational goodness and evil.

[1.](#) What is stated in the text about theoretical and practical intellect is the popular view. In this regard, there are other views. For further information on these views, see *'Alam Rabbani Gulpaygan*, *Al-Qaw'id al-Kalamiyyah*, pp. 20–28.

[2.](#) *Nahj al-'Aqq wa Kashf al-'Idq*, p. 82.

[3.](#) *Uloom 'l-Islam*, vol. 3, p. 47.

[4.](#) *Sharh al-Maq'id*, vol. 4, p. 293.

[5.](#) Shaykh Muhammad Taqi al-Jafar, *Hidayat al-Mustarshidin*, p. 432; Shaykh Muhammad Ri'az Mu'afar, *Uloom al-Fiqh*, vol. 1, p. 235.

[6.](#) *Hidayat al-Mustarshidin*, p. 433.

[7.](#) *Gawhar-e Murad*, p. 343.

[8.](#) *Al-Qaw'id al-Kalamiyyah*, p. 38.

[9.](#) Abul Is'haq Isfahani, *Al-Tabaqat fi 'd-Din*, p. 171; Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majma'at al-Ras'il al-Kubra*, vol. 1, p. 333.

[10.](#) *Mu'addiq al-'Uloom*, *Talkhish al-Mu'addiq*, p. 342; *Hakim Lihajj*, *Gawhar-e Murad*, pp. 348–349; *'Alam Rabbani Gulpaygan*, *Baith-ha-ye Ustad Subhan*: *Hasan wa Qaba-e 'Aql*, p. 91.

[11.](#) *Tafsir al-Manar*, vol. 8, pp. 50–51.

[12.](#) *'Allamah al-'Illah* have brought these proofs in his *Nahj al-'Aqq wa Kashf al-'Idq*.

[13.](#) Abul Is'haq Nawbakhti, *Al-Yaqut fi 'Ilm al-Kalam*, p. 45; *'Allamah al-'Illah*, *Anwar al-Malakut*, p. 104; *Kashf al-Murad*, “*mab'ath Hasan wa qaba-e 'aql*,” *Nahj al-'Aqq wa Kashf al-'Idq*, p. 83; Ibn Maytham Ba'raq, *Qaw'id al-Murad*, p.

104.

[14.](#) Kashf al-Murād, station (maqāḍ) 3, chap. 3, discourse on goodness and evil.

[15.](#) Nahj al-Ṣāḥiq wa Kashf al-ʿIdq, p. 84; Ibn Maytham al-Baḥārī, Qawāʿid al-Murād, p. 104.

[16.](#) Dalāʾil al-ʿIdq, vol. 1, p. 368, as quoted by Faḥr ibn Rāzbiḥ al-Ashʿarī.

[17.](#) Sīrat al-Aʿraf 7:28.

[18.](#) Tafsīr al-Manār, vol. 8, p. 59.

[19.](#) Sīrat Luqmān 31:13.

[20.](#) Sīrat al-Aʿraf 7:157.

[21.](#) Sīrat al-Muʾminīn 23:115.

[22.](#) For further information on the proofs from the Qurʾān and traditions of rational goodness and evil as well as extensive discussions on this rule, see Al-Qawāʿid al-Kalāmiyyah by ʿAlī Rabbānī Gulpaygānī.

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