

Lesson 23: The Creation as Goal-oriented

We have said earlier that one of the meanings of *ʿikmah* (wisdom) is the goal-orientedness of an action. The goal-orientedness of an action is one of the characteristics of a wise agent (*fayl*). Those theologians who believe in the principle of rational goodness and evil and have interpreted the Divine justice and wisdom on the basis of this principle have emphasized the goal-orientedness of creation, maintaining that the actions of God are based upon a purpose. Those who reject the [principle of] rational goodness and evil, however, do not believe in the actions of God as being based upon a purpose.

The Justice-oriented Argument

The basis of the justice-oriented (*ʿadliyyah*) theologians in saying that the actions of God have a purpose is that an action which is devoid of any purpose¹ and motive is futile and abominable, and God is immune from any abominable action. As Muʿaqqiq al-ʿaṣṣ has said,

وَنَفْيُ الْغَرَضِ يَسْتَلْزِمُ الْعَبَثَ.

“And the negation of motive necessitates futility.”²

This is countered by the argument that the agent that pursues a purpose or motive in his action has a defect and through this purpose or motive, he tries to recompensate for this defect, because purpose or motive connotes that its existence is preferable to its non-existence for the agent, and this signifies the agent’s desire for perfection (*istikmāʿ*).³

The justice-oriented [theologians] have given their reply by saying that the existence of purpose in an action connotes the agent’s compensation for his defect and desire for perfection when the purpose of action is traceable to the agent. But if the purpose is not traceable to the agent, this does not connote the agent’s compensation for his defect and desire for perfection. As Muʿaqqiq al-ʿaṣṣ has said in continuation to his earlier expression,

That is to say that the motive for the actions of God is not necessarily traceable to Him. In fact, the motive for His actions is related to the creatures.[4](#)

The Ash‘arī’s Objection

The Ash‘arīs have not accepted this reply, saying that tracing the benefit and purpose behind an action to other than God is either of the two cases. First is that for the action to benefit or not benefit others is the same for God, and the other is that these two differ from each other, and benefiting others takes precedence and more suitable to God. The first assumption is invalid and giving preference to the less preferable while the second assumption necessitates desire for perfection (*istikmāl*) because for God to give priority to benefiting others is a form of desire for perfection and desire for perfection, in whatever form it takes, is impossible for God.[5](#)

Reply

Giving priority or preference does not necessitate desire for perfection (*istikmāl*) but it is rather more general than that because the meaning of the agent’s giving of preference to an action is that the action is consistent with the traits and characteristics of the agent. Now, if the Agent is the Self-sufficient by essence (*al-ghanī bi ’dh-dhāt*) and All-wise (*al-‘āqim*), what is priority for Him is that His action must have a purpose and this purpose is meant for other than Him. And if the agent is inherently indigent (*faqīr bi ’dh-dhāt*), what is priority for him in his action is that which could compensate for his defect and address his desire for perfection.

Another Objection

For an action to have a purpose necessitates that apart from the agent and his action, there must be another entity which is to be called “purpose”. That is, the action is the medium for the materialization of the purpose. This assumption cannot be applied to God and His actions because all creatures are His actions, and for this reason, there is no difference between them in that some are to be regarded as the medium and others as the purpose. In fact, without any intermediary, they are all creatures of God.[6](#)

Reply

First of all, this notion that without any intermediary all beings are created by God, is not consistent with reason and experience, or clear religious texts. The principle of causation or cause-and-effect relationship which is one of the self-evident rational principles is confirmed by both revelation and experience. Some creatures are means for the emergence of other creatures, therefore, albeit the Creator by essence is no other than God and the chain of causes and effects finally ends up with Him.

Secondly, even if we do not accept the causality of some creatures for others, that all beings are created by God is in no way contradictory to the assumption that some of them serve as the purpose or motive of others or some are in the service of others. It is true that from a general perspective of the world that the universe is created by God, there is no agent and goal in the universe except Him, but from a specific or micro-level perspective, we can obviously find out that some creatures or phenomena are the service of some others while some serve as the goal of some others.

For instance, we can clearly see this reality by comparing the mother and the child. Some emotionally and physically traits of the mother are totally compatible with the needs of the child so much so that the child's survival depends on the existence of these traits. We can also observe and discern such relationship between natural phenomena and human life, and in essence, the ultimate design which governs the world of nature has no other purpose except this.

The Goal of Action and the Goal of Agent

A point which may possibly be the source of mistake by the rejectors of the goal-orientedness of the universe is to consider identical the goal of action and the goal of the agent, treating them as concomitant to each other, whereas this is not so. The goal-orientedness of an action is more general than that of an agent.

That is, whenever the agent is goal-oriented, his action will also be goal-oriented, but the opposite is not necessarily true. It can be assumed that the Agent is the Self-sufficient by essence and His Being has no goal beyond Himself but His action is goal-oriented. That is, some of His actions serve as the goal of another set of His actions. Although there may be no goal beyond Him for the totality of His actions, the action is goal-oriented whether this goal is the Agent Himself or something else.

The Third View

One of the Ash'arī theologians has adopted a third view on this issue. That is, he has accepted partly that the actions of God are caused by certain goals but rejected the same in totality. In this regard, Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftazānī has thus said that the truth is that explaining some actions, particularly religious laws, through the lens of expediencies and wisdom is something self-evident; for instance, the incumbency of prescribed punishments (*ʿuḍḍ*) and retributions (*kaffārāt*), and the unlawfulness of intoxicants and the like, as also testified by religious texts. The Holy Qur'an has stated, thus:

﴿وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ﴾

"I did not create the jinn and humans except that they may worship Me." [7](#)

﴿ مِنْ أَجْلِ ذَلِكَ كَتَبْنَا عَلَى بَنِي إِسْرَآئِيلَ ﴾

“That is why We decreed for the Children of Israel.”⁸

﴿ فَلَمَّا قَضَى زَيْدٌ مِنْهَا وَطَرًا زَوَّجْنَاكَهَا لِكَيْ لَا يَكُونَ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ حَرَجٌ ﴾

“So when Zayd had got through with her, We wedded her to you, so that there may be no blame on the faithful.”⁹

Continuing further, to make generalizations and establish the view that none of the actions of God is devoid of a goal and motive is worthy of discussion and reflection.¹⁰

It is to be noted that the question of goal-orientedness of the actions of God is not an issue pertaining to the acts of worship such that it is sufficient that instances of it are mentioned in religious texts. It is rather a rational question, and rational laws cannot be specified.

The View of Theosophers

The commentator of *Al-Mawqif* has regarded the view of Muslim theosophers as compatible with the Ash‘arī viewpoint on the question of goal-orientedness of the actions of God, and thus said after quoting the Ash‘arī viewpoint: ¹¹

وَوَافَقَهُمْ عَلَى ذَلِكَ جِهَابُذَةُ الْحُكَمَاءِ وَطَوَائِفُ الْإِلَهِيِّينَ.

This understanding of the words of theosophers is not correct. For instance, ʿAbd al-Mutaʿallih has said:

“The theosophers have not generally negated a goal or motive from the actions of God. What they have rejected is the existence of goal or motive apart from the Divine Essence for the Absolute Being and for His first action. They have affirmed special goals, however, for special or particular actions. For instance, their books are replete with discourses about the utility and purpose behind the creatures.”¹²

Motive and Exigency

Concerning this issue, some researchers have made distinction between motive (*gharaʿ*) and exigency (*maʿlaʿah*), saying that what can be said about the actions of God is that they have benefits (*maʿlījī*) and wisdom (*ʿikmah*) but these are not caused by motives.

The difference between motive and exigency is that motive is traceable to the agent while exigency

pertains to others. It is said, therefore, that the actions of God are caused by motives; it is a kind of figurative speech, likening the actions of God to those of humans. That is, benefits and wisdom result from the actions of God and if they result from the actions of man, they will be considered the motive and goal of his actions.¹³

It is to be noted that the result of this examination can be traced back to the distinction between the goal-orientedness of the action and the goal-orientedness of the agent which we have mentioned earlier. That is, the actions of God – both cosmic and legislative – have certain benefits, exigencies and wisdom for the creatures and not for God.

For this reason, God is not an agent by motive or goal (*fī 'il bi 'd-dīn wa bi 'l-qa'd*) but rather the Agent by satisfaction (*bi 'r-rīḍā*) or special attention (*bi 'l-in'yah*), as has been proved in philosophy. And God's agency (*fī 'iliyyah*) is not dependent on a motive or intention which is separate from the Essence because if it is so, His Agency will not be essential (*bi 'dh-dhāt*) and whatever pertains to the essential knowledge of God is not an absolute action but rather an action characterized by wisdom and expediency. In conclusion, while it is not an action by motive, His action is goal-oriented.

The Qur'an and the Goal-orientedness of the Universe

Verses of the Qur'an explicitly support the goal-orientedness of the universe, as it has thus stated:

﴿وَمَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ﴾

“We did not create the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them except with reason.”¹⁴

﴿وَمَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا لْعَيْنٍ﴾

“We did not create the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them for play.”¹⁵

﴿مَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ وَأَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى﴾

“We did not create the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them except with reason and for a specified term.”¹⁶

﴿وَمَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَاءَ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا بَاطِلًا﴾

“We did not create the sky and the earth and whatever is between them in vain.”¹⁷

The implication of these verses is that the world of nature has been created with reason and vainness has no place in it, and its creation has not been for play and futility. And this fact dictates that the movement in the universe will one day come to an end and attain its desired end or goal. That goal will be reflected in the other world. [18](#)

Apart from these quoted verses which signify the goal-orientedness of the entire universe, other verses speak about the goal-orientedness of the life of human being and other creatures. In many verses of the Qur'an, man's life and his culmination are regarded as the motive or goal behind the creation of the earth and the bounties of nature. It thus says for instance:

﴿هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا﴾

“It is He who created for you all that is in the earth.” [19](#)

﴿وَاللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِمَّا خَلَقَ ظِلَالًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنَ الْجِبَالِ أَكْنَانًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ سَرَابِيلَ تَقِيكُمُ الْحَرَّ وَسَرَابِيلَ تَقِيكُمُ الْبَأْسَ كَذَلِكَ يُتِمُّ نِعْمَتَهُ عَلَيْكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُسْلِمُونَ﴾

“It is Allah who has made for you shade from what He created, and made for you retreats in the mountains, and made for you garments that protect you from heat and garments that protect you from your [mutual] violence. That is how He completes His blessing upon you so that you may submit [to Him].” [20](#)

Regarding the fact that the creation of man is not in vain and the purpose behind his creation will be realized in the other world, it thus says:

﴿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](#)

Man's attainment of the said ultimate goal depends on the realization of other goals which include trial and test, worship and devotion to God, submission and obedience to Him. The following verses express these goals:

﴿إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا مَا عَلَى الْأَرْضِ زِينَةً لَهَا لِنَبْلُوهُمْ أَيُّهُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا﴾

“Indeed We have made whatever is on the earth an adornment for it that We may test them [to see] which of them is best in conduct.” [22](#)

﴿وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ﴾

“I did not create the jinn and humans except that they may worship Me.”²³

﴿كَذَلِكَ يَتِمُّ نِعْمَتُهُ عَلَيْكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُسْلِمُونَ﴾

“That is how He completes His blessing upon you so that you may submit [to Him].”²⁴

The Perfect Man as the Philosophy behind Creation

It can be deduced from the above verses that the human being is the motive or goal behind the creation of the universe but not on the basis of his material or physical life. That may be so for in this perspective, it has no superiority to other creatures in that it is the goal behind their creation. It is rather from the perspective of spiritual life and special perfection which can be obtained through devotion and servitude to God.

This point can be clearly inferred from the expression “*that We may test them [to see] which of them is best in conduct*” for the implication of this statement is that the purpose behind the creation of the universe is through the excellence and superiority of action. For instance, this Sacred Tradition (Ṣaḥīḥ al-quds²⁵)²⁵ which is addressed to the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) speaks about this fact:

لَوْلَاكَ لَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْأَفْلاكَ.

“Had it not been for you, I would not have created the heavenly firmaments.”²⁶

Review Questions

1. Write down the argument of the justice-oriented (‘*adliyyah*’) theologians on the goal-orientedness of the actions of God.
2. Write down the first objection of the Ash‘arīs on the goal-orientedness of the actions of God along with the refutation to it.
3. Write down the second objection of the Ash‘arīs on the goal-orientedness of the actions of God along with the refutation to it.
4. What does it mean by the goal of the action and the goal of the agent? Which one is meant by the goal-orientedness of the actions of God?
5. What is the Muslim theosophers’ view on the goal-orientedness of the actions of God?

6. Cite two verses of the Qur'an to substantiate the goal-orientedness of the actions of God.

7. Write down three verses of the Qur'an about the goal-orientedness of human life.

- [1.](#) The difference between purpose (ghayyah) and motive (ghara) is that motive is a specific purpose and it means the purpose behind the action of an agent that has free-will. See Sharh al-Isharat, vol. 3, p. 149.
- [2.](#) Kashf al-Murad, station (maqad) 3, chap. 3.
- [3.](#) Sharh al-Mawqif, vol. 8, pp. 202–203.
- [4.](#) Ibid., p. 203.
- [5.](#) Sharh al-Mawqif, vol. 8, p. 203.
- [6.](#) Ibid., vol. 8, pp. 203–204.
- [7.](#) Surah al-Dhariyat 51:56.
- [8.](#) Surah al-Maidah 5:32.
- [9.](#) Surah al-Azab 33:37.
- [10.](#) Sharh al-Maqad, vol. 4, pp. 302–303.
- [11.](#) Sharh al-Mawqif, vol. 6, p. 202.
- [12.](#) Al-Asfar al-Arba'ah, vol. 7, p. 84.
- [13.](#) Sarmayeh-ye Imn, p. 74.
- [14.](#) Surah al-Fajr 15:85.
- [15.](#) Surah al-Anbiya' 21:16.
- [16.](#) Surah al-Aqaf 46:3.
- [17.](#) Surah Ad 38:27.
- [18.](#) Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, vol. 16, p. 158.
- [19.](#) Surah al-Baqarah 2:29.
- [20.](#) Surah al-Nahl 16:81.
- [21.](#) Surah al-Mu'minin 23:115.
- [22.](#) Surah al-Kahf 18:7.
- [23.](#) Surah al-Dhariyat 51:56.
- [24.](#) Surah al-Nahl 16:81.
- [25.](#) Hadith Quds (or Sacred Hadith): a sub-category of Hadith, which are sayings of God but differ from the Qur'an as they are expressed in the words of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). [Trans.]
- [26.](#) Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, vol. 10, p. 152.

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