

Lesson 28: The Mandatoriness of Obligation

One of the issues put forth by theologians concerning the justice of God is the issue of *taklif* (obligation or duty). The definition of *taklif* and its types, the philosophy of *taklif* and its mandatoriness, and the conditions and salient features of *taklif* are among the topics discussed in this regard. This question has direct connection to the doctrine called “necessity of religion”.

Definition and Classification

In the lexicon, *taklif* is derived from *kalafat* which means to be in hardship (*mushaqqah*), and technically, it is defined in different ways, the most comprehensive of which is as follows:

إِنَّهُ بَعَثُ مَنْ تَجِبُ طَاعَتُهُ إِبْتِدَاءً عَلَى مَا فِيهِ كُفَّةٌ وَمَشَقَّةٌ.

That is to say that *taklif* means to dispatch and command someone who is primarily obligatory to obey to do something coupled with heaviness and hardship.¹ Given the adverb *ibtidā'an* (primarily), the dispatch and command of a prophet, Imam or other individuals who are obligatory to obey according to the command of God are not included. *Taklif*, then, is exclusive only to the dispatch and command of God.

The attachment of *taklif* to hardship means that making it obligatory according to a religious command is coupled with the said attribute (hardship), although the said action may be pleasant and desirable to the person. One example is the eating of some meat of an offered sacrificial animal by the one who performs *hajj al-tamattu'*.²

Taklif is attached sometimes to a belief and at other times to a practice, and a belief may be purely rational, purely textual, or rational (*'aqlī*) and textual (*naqlī*). Examples of purely rational belief are the beliefs in the existence of God, His knowledge, power, and wisdom; that is, beliefs on which the religious proof depends. Such beliefs cannot be proved except through the intellect and what exists in the religious texts concerning them that are instructive (*irshādī*) and confirmatory (*ta'yīdī*) in nature.

Purely textual beliefs are beliefs which cannot be proved by the intellect; Examples are those pertaining to the questioning in the grave, the Scale (*mizān*), the Path (*ḥirāq*) and the like. Meanwhile, an example of the belief which is textual as well as rational is the belief in the Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*).

Sometimes, practical *taklīf* is also purely rational; among them, for instance, are the mandatoriness of discharging a trust, gratefulness to a benefactor, kindness to parents, and renunciation of injustice and lying. There are also times when practical *taklīf* is textual; for instance, many of the secondary laws concerning the ritual prayer, fasting (*ḥawm*), alms-tax (*zakāt*), and the like.

From another perspective, it can be said that all the religious laws are rational as well as textual because since these laws follow a series of real criteria, interests and noumenal corruption, they are called 'rational' because the intellect declares the need for this criteria, interests and corruption. And since they are declared through the revelation, they are called 'religious' (*sharʿī*).³

Another classification of *taklīf* is to identify it as obligatory (*wājib*), prohibited (*ḥarām*), recommendatory (*muṣtaḥabb*), abominable (*makrḥ*), or permissible (*mubḥḥ*). In this regard, Ḥakīm Lḥj has thus said:

Taklīf which means 'command' is a Divine address which pertains to the actions of [God's] servants which are described as good or bad through *iqṭīʿ* (requirement) or *takhayyur* (giving options). *Iqṭīʿ* means a demand which pertains to an action or non-performance of it while *takhayyur* means to settle down whether to do or not to do an act.

If the demand is thus related to an action, it is called good (*ḥasan*) because demanding for something bad is bad according to any reasonable person. And if the demand is related to relinquishing an action, the said action is bad because to demand abandoning something good is bad, and to demand an action – if it is not permissible to abandon – is called *wājib* (obligatory), and if it is permissible to abandon, it is called *mandḥb*, and if it is required to abandon, it is called *ḥarām* (prohibited). If the action is permissible, it is called *makrḥ* (abominable), and the action which pertains to *takhayyur* is called *mubḥḥ* (permissible).⁴

The Philosophy behind Obligation

There is no doubt that *taklīf* (obliging) is good but it is an action of God, and His action is good. But as to what the form of goodness of *taklīf* is, this is something connected to the philosophy of *taklīf* and the motive behind it, and the justice-oriented ('*adliyyah*) theologians have stated some aspects of it.

1. One reason for the goodness of *taklīf* is that it provides the ground for a person's receipt of great rewards in the Hereafter. According to the theologians, the otherworldly rewards are not only the receipt of otherworldly pleasures and enjoyments but rather they are accompanied by God's expression of special praise, honor, recognition and appreciation.

That is, on the Day of Resurrection God shall express His special praise, honor, recognition and appreciation to the doers of good, and also give them their otherworldly rewards. It is clear that special honor and praise are unacceptable unless they are worthy of them, and it is like the case of an ignorant person who is honored in the way the learned are honored.

The merit of receiving such special honor and praise depends on the outcome of the test to be given to them. Religious obligation, in reality, is the very scheme for this divine test. *Taklif*, therefore, provides the ground to man to earn merit to receive otherworldly rewards, and there is no doubt concerning the goodness of such important motive.⁵

2. The religious obligations are manifestations of grace in relation to the rational obligations because whenever a person observes acts of worship and religious commands such as the ritual prayer, fasting, *zakāt* and the like, he is more prepared to observe rational obligations such as acquisition of knowledge, recognition of the rights of individuals, justice, avoidance of injustice, and the like. Any manifestation of grace, for that purpose, is acceptable, nay obligatory.⁶

3. The purpose behind the creation of the human being is for him to attain proximity to God (*qurb ilallah*), thereby achieving his ideal perfection. On one hand, the essence of man consists of two faculties – intellect or reason (*‘aql*) and carnal desire (*shahwah*) – which are somehow opposite to each other, and the felicity of man lies in his ability to set the faculty of *shahwah* under the control of *‘aql* so as to address all his physical needs and also to attain spiritual perfections.

The materialization of this purpose requires a precise and comprehensive program through which extremes on any of the two faculties could be prevented, and the principle of justice could prevail over the material and spiritual life of man. On one hand, most people could not grasp such a program. In fact, no one could know the most perfect form of this program. The Divine wisdom, therefore, necessitates that a special program as religious laws and duties be prescribed for the human beings.⁷

4. From the perspective of social life, religious duties are also beneficial, nay necessary, for the human beings because social life is in need of an all-encompassing law that stipulates the rights and duties of individuals in relation to one another. As the human laws lack comprehensiveness on account of man’s intellectual limitations and do not include spiritual and sacred dimensions, they do not have internal executive guarantee.

They are also incapable of purifying and refining the human souls, because the most important element of self-purification and refinement are faith and submission to the Perpetual Power. The religious duties, however, incorporates all those qualities as they stem from eternal knowledge of God and are based upon the belief in the Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*) and the Resurrection (*ma‘ād*).

As such, man accepts them with utmost confidence and acts upon them from a perspective of sanctity [and spirituality]. In this case, they keep alive the remembrance of God in the hearts as well as inform the people of the life after death and otherworldly rewards and punishments. As a result, apart from

spiritual benefits and social effects, they have also significant spiritual and educational benefits.[8](#)

Obligation and Power

One of the important conditions of obligation is that the obliged person (*mukallaf*) must have the ability to fulfill his obligation. For this reason, any unbearable obligation is bad, and it is impossible to attribute it to God. Unbearable obligation has two types. One is that the essence of the action is one of the impossible things such as coincidence of opposites. Another is that the action is possible but the one obliged is incapable of doing so, such as flying on the air without the use of appropriate means and devices. The Holy Qur'an explicitly states that God does not oblige anyone with anything which is beyond his ability to do:

﴿ لَا يُكَلِّفُ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا ﴾

“Allah does not task any soul beyond its capacity.”[9](#)

The Ash'arīs and the Permissibility of Unbearable Obligation

The Ash'arīs regard the unbearable obligation as permissible because according to them, no action is intrinsically good or bad, and goodness and evil originate from the Divine command and prohibition. There is no reason, therefore, for the badness of an unbearable obligation, but on its occurrence there are two views being presented. Some of them who have considered it a reality have mentioned God's knowledge of actions as the origin of the fatalistic nature of actions.

For instance, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī was of the opinion that the obligation of the unbelievers who have left this world in a state of unbelief is like the unbearable obligations, because God has foreknowledge that they will not have faith and God's knowledge is not violable. [10](#) In the words of Taftazānī, however, they do not really believe in the occurrence of unbearable obligation because God Himself has negated it. [11](#)

The Ash'arīs have cited some verses of the Qur'an in proving the permissibility of unbearable obligation. [12](#)

A reflection on these verses makes it clear that they have no proof for such a claim. One of these verses is about a group of the hell-dwellers in which it is mentioned that in this world they have no ability of seeing and hearing the truth:

﴿ مَا كَانُوا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ السَّمْعَ وَمَا كَانُوا يُبْصِرُونَ ﴾

“For they could neither listen, nor did they used to see.”¹³

A scrutiny of the verse shows that their lack of ability to hear and see the truth does not mean that they were really incapable and that they were born blind and deaf. It rather means that as a result of being engrossed in corruption and disobedience, they used to abhor the truth and had no perseverance for seeing or hearing it. In usual conversations, whenever a person does not like to see another person or to hear his voice, he says, “I have no patience to listen to his words” or “I have no ability to hear his voice.”¹⁴

This is while his faculties of seeing and hearing are healthy and he is not incapable of seeing or hearing anything. The ability which is a condition in obligation (*taklif*) is understood in this sense. And it is not that all individuals must have the spirit of submission and surrender so as to be obliged.

A proof of this point is that in another verse it is stated that since they have not listened to the words of truth, the inhabitants of hell express remorse, saying that had they dealt with the truth reasonably (and not out of prejudice and obstinacy), they would not have been among the hell-dwellers:

﴿ وَقَالُوا لَوْ كُنَّا نَسْمَعُ أَوْ نَعْقِلُ مَا كُنَّا فِي أَصْحَابِ السَّعِيرِ ﴾

“They will further say, ‘Had we but listened or used our intelligence, we should not (now) be among the Companions of the Blazing Fire!’”¹⁵

Their regret and remorse show that they could have listened to the truth and deal with it wisely.

Some have cited the following verse to support the permissibility, nay the occurrence of unbearable obligation:

﴿ رَبَّنَا وَلَا تَحْمِلْنَا مَا لَا طَاقَةَ لَنَا بِهِ ﴾

“Our Lord! Lay not upon us what we have no strength to bear!”¹⁶

If unbearable obligation were impossible for God [to command], there would have been no need for such a request on the part of [His] servants. In fact, the conventional style is to request for whatever is realistic.¹⁷

This argument, in the way Taftazani¹⁸ has expressed it – is incorrect, because what man has no ability to bear in this verse refers to the consequences and repercussions of his errors in relation to his Divine obligations.¹⁸

Another verse cited to support the notion of permissibility of unbearable obligation is this:

﴿يَوْمَ يُكْشَفُ عَنْ سَاقٍ وَيُدْعَوْنَ إِلَى السُّجُودِ فَلَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ﴾

“The day when the catastrophe occurs, and they are summoned to prostrate themselves, they will not be able [to do it].”¹⁹

This argument is equally incorrect because the Day of Resurrection is not the arena of obligation but rather the court of reckoning and accountability:

أَلْيَوْمَ عَمَلٌ وَلَا حِسَابَ وَعَدًّا حِسَابٌ وَلَا عَمَلٌ.

“Today is that of action and not reckoning while tomorrow is that of reckoning and not action.”²⁰

The call for prostration or the command to it, therefore, is not *taklīf*; it is rather meant to foster the feeling of regret and remorse; that is, on the Day of Resurrection they will find out that human felicity depends on prostration and humility to God and since they were among the arrogant in the world, they will incur the Divine wrath.

It is here that in order for them to better discern the retribution for their arrogance, they will be asked to prostrate but they will not be able to do so. Or, since the Day of Resurrection is not the arena for action or since the quality of arrogance has become deeply embedded in their nature, they will not be able to express humility (prostration) even on the Day of Resurrection.²¹

Review Questions

1. What is the meaning of *taklīf*?
2. Write down the classification of *taklīf* according to connections.
3. State the classifications of *taklīf* according to its type.
4. What is the first proof of the good aspect of *taklīf*?
5. State the second proof of the good aspect of *taklīf*.
6. Write down the third and fourth proofs of the good aspect of *taklīf*.
7. Write down the fifth proof of the good aspect of *taklīf*.
8. What is the important condition of *taklīf*?
9. Write down the reason for permissibility of unbearable obligation according to the Ash‘arīs and the refutation to it.

- [1.](#) Qawā'id al-Murīd, p. 114; Irshād al-ḥalībiyyīn, p. 272.
- [2.](#) Ḥajj al-tamattu': a type of pilgrimage which is applicable to those living outside Mecca, i.e. out of limits of the Ḥaram (the precinct of the Grand Mosque, Ka'bah and/or the surrounding holy places in Mecca). [Trans.]
- [3.](#) See Gawhar-e Murīd, p. 347.
- [4.](#) Gawhar-e Murīd, p. 346.
- [5.](#) See Kashf al-Murīd, station (maqā'ad) 3, chap. 3, issue 11; Qawā'id al-Marām, p. 115; Irshād al-ḥalībiyyīn, p. 273.
- [6.](#) See Gawhar-e Murīd, p. 352.
- [7.](#) See ibid., pp. 353-354.
- [8.](#) Kashf al-Murīd, station (maqā'ad) 3, chap. 3, issue 11.
- [9.](#) Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:286.
- [10.](#) The reply to this objection is given in Lesson 30.
- [11.](#) Sharḥ al-Maqā'id, vol. 14, pp. 298-301.
- [12.](#) For information about the verses cited by the Ash'arīs in proving the permissibility of unbearable obligation, see the book Al-Lam' by Ash'arī.
- [13.](#) Sūrat Hūd 11:20.
- [14.](#) Zamakhsharī, Al-Kashshaf, vol. 2, p. 386.
- [15.](#) Sūrat al-Mulk 67:10.
- [16.](#) Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:286.
- [17.](#) Sharḥ al-Maqā'id, vol. 4, p. 301.
- [18.](#) Al-Ma'zīn fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān, vol. 2, p. 445.
- [19.](#) Sūrat al-Qalām 68:42.
- [20.](#) Nahj al-Balāghah, Sermon 42.
- [21.](#) Al-Ma'zīn fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān, vol. 19, p. 385; Al-Kashshaf, vol. 4, p. 595.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/discursive-theology-volume-1-ali-rabbani-gulpaygani/lesson-28-mandatoriness-obligation#comment-0>