

Lesson 29: The Necessity for Grace

One of the important principles and rules in the justice-oriented (*'adliyyah*) theology is that of *luḥf* (Divine grace) which is considered the most important theological rule (*qā'idah*) after that of the rational goodness and evil. The justice-oriented theologians have proved many of the religious doctrines and beliefs on this basis.

The incumbency of religious obligations, the necessity for the mission (*bi'thah*) of the prophets, the incumbency of the infallibility of the prophets, the Divine promises and warnings, the goodness of primary suffering, and the incumbency of *imāmah* (post-prophetic Divine leadership) are among the issues which are founded on this rule.

The overwhelming majority of the justice-oriented theologians have supported this rule of *luḥf*. In this regard, none of the famous Imāmī theologians has been reported to have any opposite view. Among the Mu'tazilī theologians, however, Bashār ibn Mu'tamar (died 210 AH) and Ja'far ibn Ḥarb have been reported to have opposed this rule of *luḥf*¹ although it is said that the said two personalities have made a recantation or disavowal of their opposition to *luḥf* and accepted it later. The Ash'arī theologians who denied the principle of rational goodness and evil also considered unacceptable the rule of *luḥf*.

It can be inferred from various proofs and pieces of evidence that this rule – like that of rational goodness and evil – is one of the earliest questions in theology which had caught the attention of the justice-oriented theologians. When dealing with the common Mu'tazilī beliefs, Shahrīstānī has made mention of the rule of *luḥf* (grace) and *aḥḥāḥ* (most expedient). It is also said that they have a consensus of opinion that *taklīf* is a necessity of the Divine grace.² In his book *Al-Fihrist*,³ Shaykh al-Ḥafṣī has mentioned the book *Al-Aḥḥāḥ* as one of the treatises of Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam (died 179 or 199 AH).

[The Definition and Classification of Luḥf \(Grace\)](#)

In the lexicon, the word *luḥf* is used to mean kindness and compassion, closeness and proximity, intricacy and subtlety, secrecy and concealment, softness and openness, and in the science of *tajwīd*,⁴ *talaḥḥāf* means deflection (*imḥālah*).⁵

In the theological parlance, *luṭf* is one of the Attributes of Action of God; that is, the Actions which are related to those who are obliged (*mukallif*) and it means that God does for those who are obliged whatever draws them to obedience [to Him] and keeps them away from sin. And this matter is concomitant with His justice and wisdom, as we will explain. The following expression is the popular definition of the rule of *luṭf*:

الْلُّطْفُ مَا يُقَرِّبُ الْعِبَادَ إِلَى الطَّاعَةِ وَ يُبْعِدُهُ عَنِ الْمَعْصِيَةِ.

“Grace is that which makes the servant closer to obedience [to God] and keeps him away from committing sin.”

The theologians have divided *luṭf* in two ways:

First is whether the one being obliged (*mukallaf*) benefits from the said grace or not. Once he benefits from it and performs his obligation under the auspices of the said grace, it is called ‘actualizing’ (*muṭaʿaṭṭil*) grace; that is, the grace which reaches the stage of materialization and actualization. Whenever the obliged person does not make use of it, that grace is called ‘near-stationed’ (*muqarrib*) grace because its role is only to pave the ground for guidance. In reality, it brings the obliged person closer to obedience [to God] although this may not be realized on account of a contrary choice of action in the obliged person.

The sum of these two divisions is encouragement and motivation. As Sayyid Murtaḥḥ has said,

“*Luṭf* has two types: one is that through its agency the obliged person chooses to perform the act of obedience [to God] and without this *luṭf* he will not choose so. Another [type] is that through its agency the obliged person gets closer to the performance of the act of obedience, and the sum of these two is that they play the role of motivator.”⁶

Some have considered the difference between the *muqarrib* and *muṭaʿaṭṭil* grace in that the latter is measured with the motive behind the obligation while the former is measured with the motive behind the creation.⁷ However, first of all, this distinction cannot be found in the utterances of the justice-oriented theologians. Secondly, the motive behind the obligation is not the motive behind the creation by accident, but rather these two are parallel to each other.

The second way of dividing *luṭf* is according to its agent (*fāʿil*) and in this way there are three types of *luṭf*:

1. *Luṭf* is a direct action of God without any mediation; for example, stipulating the religious obligations, sending of the prophets, endowing them with miracle (*muʿjizah*), and presentation and setting up of ontological proofs of the Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*).

2. *Luṭf* is the direct action of the one who is the recipient; for example, reflection and thinking on the proofs of the Divine Unity and the miracles of the prophets, and abiding by the religious orders.

3. *Luṭf* is the action of other obliged persons. For instance, promotion of the religious laws which is an action of the prophets is grace for those who are obliged, and prohibition of whatever is evil, which is a collective action of those who are obliged and whose outcome is grace for the other obliged persons.

Regarding the first type, the action of grace is incumbent upon God, and regarding the second type, it is incumbent upon God to oblige the action of grace to the obliged person. Regarding the third type, it is necessary to make it obligatory upon the other obliged persons. In this type, it is necessary for the one upon whom grace is obligatory to benefit from it somehow and to be a grace for himself, so that injustice would not be necessary for him.⁸

The Conditions of Grace

Some conditions have been mentioned for grace and they are as follows:

1. On the ability of the obliged person (*mukallaf*) to discharge the obligation (*taklīf*), grace (*luṭf*) must have no role to play; that is, the ability to discharge the obligation cannot be regarded as grace, because grace differs according to the obligations, and ability is one of the conditions of obligation. Thus, as long as there is no ability, there is no obligation, and so long as there is no obligation, grace has no meaning.
2. Grace must not lead to coercing or compelling the obliged person, because grace differs according to the obligations, and in the absence of free-will, there is no obligation. The following passage indicates the said two conditions: ⁹

وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ حَظٌّ فِي التَّمَكِينِ وَلَمْ يَبْلُغْ حَدَّ الْإِلْجَاءِ

3. There must be compatibility between grace and obligation, because grace plays as a motivator and its being a motivator with respect to the obligation depends on the existence of compatibility between them, and there must be no disconnection [between them].
4. The obliged person must be aware of the grace because without such awareness, grace cannot function as a motivator. Of course, in this regard, synoptic knowledge is also enough. For example, he must be aware that some hardships and afflictions he is experiencing are due to his inattention to God and his continued indulgence in sins.¹⁰

Reasons behind the Necessity for Grace

The proof of wisdom

The most prominent rational proof of the incumbency of grace upon God is the principle of the Divine wisdom in the sense that abandonment of grace necessitates reversal of the motive which, in turn, is incompatible with wisdom, and it is invalid. Acting upon grace is thus incumbent. As Muḥaqqiq al-ṣafī has said,

وَاللُّطْفُ وَاجِبٌ لِيَحْصُلَ الْغَرَضُ بِهِ.

“Grace is incumbent so as to materialize the motive.”¹¹

To elaborate, God has made religious obligations incumbent upon the human beings. Acting upon the obligations, therefore, is desirable and pleasing to God. Meanwhile, He knows that if He does not act upon grace, the necessary ground for the realization of obligations cannot be paved, and God’s acting upon grace necessitates no warning.

In this case, abandonment of grace is rationally regarded as reversal of motive. For instance, someone holds a party and he seriously wants a certain person to be present in the said party. He knows that if he follows a certain protocol in inviting him, the said guest will attend the party, otherwise the latter will not accept the invitation. Now, if he tries to invite him without observing the said protocol, it will rationally be considered reversal of the motive to invite someone to that party.¹²

God’s generosity and munificence

In his book *Awḥāl al-Maqṣūd*, Shaykh al-Mufīd has explained the incumbency of grace on the basis of God’s generosity and munificence, saying thus:

إِنَّ مَا أُوجِبَهُ أَصْحَابُ اللَّطْفِ مِنَ اللَّطْفِ إِنَّمَا وَجِبَ مِنْ جَهَةِ الْجُودِ وَالْكَرَمِ

That is to say that providing the means and conditions that encourage those who are obliged to act upon the religious laws and keep them away from sins is one of the manifestations of God’s generosity and munificence on those who are obliged, and for God to abandon generosity and munificence is a flaw and impossibility. As such, acting upon grace is incumbent [upon Him].

Given this, the reply to this objection becomes clear: acting upon the dictates of generosity and munificence is deigned and unnecessary, whereas the action of *luḥf* is obligatory. So, how can it be possible to explain an obligatory action on the basis of something not obligatory?

The reply is that in the theological parlance, incumbency (*wujūb*) with respect to the actions of God does not mean jurisprudential incumbency; it rather means that concomitance between perfection in action

and perfection in the Divine Essence and Attributes of Essence. Once generosity and munificence are among the existential perfections, abandonment of it is impossible for God, as in the case of justice and goodness.

What the theologians mean by the rational incumbency of actions upon God is that any action whose agent is worthy of blame cannot come from God, the Exalted. [13](#)

In principle, regarding the stipulation of the religious obligations by God, three assumptions can be thought of:

1. God stipulates the obligations and announces them to those who are obliged, and He provides them with the necessary means and preliminary grounds for discharging them.
2. In addition to what have been said, He puts those who are obliged in certain conditions wherein they have no option but to discharge those obligations.
3. Apart from announcing the obligations and giving ability to them, as mentioned in the first assumption, He does certain things for them such that even if He does not compel those who are obliged to discharge their obligations, as mentioned in the second assumption, He plays a role in encouraging and persuading them to discharge their obligations, for example, by giving promise of rewards to the obedient and threat of punishment and chastisement to the disobedient.

Among the abovementioned assumptions, the second is rationally unacceptable as it is incompatible with the philosophy of obligation which is providing of test to the servants [of God] and development of their spiritual endowments. The first assumption is also inconsistent with the generosity, munificence and wisdom of God.

The third assumption, therefore, is the correct one, and this is harmonious with the rule of *luḡf*. [14](#)

The Qur'an and the Rule of Grace

It can be clearly inferred from a study of Qur'anic verses that the sending down (*bi'thah*) of the prophets, their unique attitude and practical conduct, the revelation of heavenly books, declaration of the Divine knowledge in the framework of simple and expressive parables and expressions, the Divine warnings and glad tidings through the prophets, difficulties and afflictions, material blessings and bounties, and Unseen help and succor are all regarded as manifestations and expressions of the Divine grace – some of which are concomitant with the Divine wisdom while others are manifestations of generosity and munificence of God.

The Holy Qur'an has regarded prophethood (*nubuwwah*) as a manifestation of God's mercy, as it says thus:

﴿أَهُمْ يَقْسِمُونَ رَحْمَةَ رَبِّكَ﴾

“Is it they who dispense the mercy of your Lord?”¹⁵

This verse was a reply to the narrow-minded people who said in protest to the Holy Prophet (ﷺ), “Why was the Qur’an not revealed to two prominent men of Arabia (Walīd ibn Mughayrah and ‘Urwah ibn Mas‘ūd)?”

﴿وَقَالُوا لَوْلَا نُزِّلَ هَذَا الْقُرْآنُ عَلَى رَجُلٍ مِنَ الْقَرْيَتَيْنِ عَظِيمٍ﴾

“And they said, ‘Why was not this Qur’an sent down to some great man from the two cities?’¹⁶

The Holy Qur’an has regarded the soft disposition and flexibility of the Prophet (ﷺ) and refraining from harsh treatment of the people as signs of God’s mercy upon him and the people, stating thus:

﴿فَبِمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِّنَ اللَّهِ لِنْتَ لَهُمْ وَلَوْ كُنْتَ فَظًّا غَلِيظَ الْقَلْبِ لَانْفَضُّوا مِنْ حَوْلِكَ﴾

“It is by Allah’s mercy that you are gentle to them; and had you been harsh and hardhearted, surely they would have scattered from around you.”¹⁷

God thus admonishes Prophet Mūsā (Moses) and Prophet Hārūn (Aaron) (‘a) in dealing with Pharaoh:

﴿أَذْهَبَا إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ إِنَّهُ طَغَىٰ * فَقُولَا لَهُ قَوْلًا لَّيِّنًا لَّعَلَّهُ يَتَذَكَّرُ أَوْ يَخْشَىٰ﴾

“Let the two of you go to Pharaoh. Indeed he has rebelled. Speak to him in a soft manner; maybe he will take admonition or fear.”¹⁸

From the viewpoint of the Qur’an, the sending (*bi’tḥāh*) of the prophets as bearers of good news and as warners has completed the argument (*‘ujjah*) for the people, thereby giving no more room for complaint:

﴿رُسُلًا مُّبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنذِرِينَ لِئَلَّا يَكُونَ لِلنَّاسِ عَلَى اللَّهِ حُجَّةٌ بَعْدَ الرُّسُلِ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا﴾

“...apostles, as bearers of good news and warners, so that mankind may not have any argument against Allah, after the [sending of the] apostles; and Allah is all-mighty, all-wise.”¹⁹

The phrase “all-mighty, all-wise” (*‘azīzan, ‘akīman*) indicates that no one has any right or argument against God. Since He is all-wise, however, wisdom necessitates guidance of the people in its most perfect form. So, He has sent the prophets so that apart from conveying the Divine laws to the people,

they could encourage them by giving glad tidings and warning to act upon those laws and to refrain from disobeying God.

From the viewpoint of the Qur'an, the philosophy of some adversities and afflictions in human life is to bring them to their senses and to strengthen the spirit of submission to the Divine commands in them:

﴿ وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا فِي قَرْيَةٍ مِّن نَّبِيٍّ إِلَّا أَخَذْنَا أَهْلَهَا بِالْبَأْسَاءِ وَالضَّرَّاءِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَضُرَّعُونَ ﴾

“We did not send a prophet to any town without visiting its people with stress and distress so that they might entreat [for Allah’s forgiveness].”²⁰

There are many other verses that talk about God’s wisdom, grace and mercy and their manifestations in the life of man for his guidance toward the Straight Path.

Divine Grace and Sayings of the Imams (‘a)

A statement which has been transmitted from Imam ‘Alī (‘a) regarding the purpose behind the creation of man and the philosophy of obligation has astounded many thinkers. As Jābir (died 255 AH) has said, “This utterance is the most comprehensive in this regard.” After affirming this acknowledgment of Jābir, Abū ‘Alī Jubbā’ī (died 303 AH) has also said, “In terms of comprehensiveness, this utterance is in such a level that knows no room for improvement or defect.”²¹

Imam ‘Alī’s (‘a) utterance is as follows:

“Allah created the human beings and wanted them to have pleasant attitude and character, and He knew that they will not be such unless He informs them of the source of their gains and losses, and this depends on command and prohibition (religious obligations). Command and prohibition, in turn, necessitate promise and threat, hope and fear, and their realization depend on [experiencing] adversities and prosperities. For this reason, He has mixed the life in this world with pleasant and unpleasant things so as to guide them toward the otherworldly pleasures and sufferings.”²²

In the speech of the esteemed daughter of the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) delivered after the demise of her beloved father in the grand mosque of Madīnah, some of these manifestations of the Divine grace are pointed out. At the outset, the said immaculate lady talked about the purpose behind the creation and identified it as establishment of God’s wisdom and reminding the people to obedience and servitude [to God]. She then made mention of the philosophy behind the Divine rewards and punishments as admittance of the obedient ones to paradise and keeping them out of hell:

إِبْتَدَعَ الْأَشْيَاءَ لَا مِنْ شَيْءٍ كَانَ قَبْلَهَا... تَثْبِيثًا لِحِكْمَتِهِ، وَتَنْبِيهًا عَلَى طَاعَتِهِ... وَتَعْبُدًا لِبَرِيَّتِهِ، ثُمَّ جَعَلَ الثَّوَابَ عَلَى طَاعَتِهِ، وَوَضَعَ الْعِقَابَ عَلَى مَعْصِيَتِهِ، زِيَادَةً لِعِبَادِهِ مِنْ نَقْمَتِهِ، وَحَيَاشَةَ لَهُمْ إِلَى جَنَّتِهِ.

“He created the things without anything there prior to them... in order to establish His wisdom and remind them (people) of obedience to Him and urge them to servitude [to Him]... Then, He set reward for obedience to Him and punishment for disobedience to Him so as for His servants to be wary of His vengeance and be drawn toward His paradise.”[23](#)

Reply to the Objections

There are some objections to the rule of *luḥf* which we must mention and refute here:

1. The rule of *luḥf* necessitates determining an obligation for God. After pointing out the Mu‘tazilī viewpoint on the incumbency of recompense and grace on God, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī has said, “Ruling (*ḥukm*) cannot be affirmed except through the Divine law (*shar‘*), and there is no judge who is superior to the Law-giver in that he could oblige Him to do something.”[24](#)

The reply to this objection was given in the section related to the rational goodness and evil, and its gist is that “incumbency upon Allah” (*wujūb ‘alallāh*) in the theological parlance does not mean juristic or legislative incumbency but rather rational incumbency. That is, the materialization of what the essential perfections of God necessitate is incumbent upon Him. In other words, perfection in His Essence and Attributes necessitates perfection in His Action.

2. If *luḥf* were incumbent upon God, there would have been no more unbeliever and sinner because God can express His grace to each of the human race to such an extent that all will believe in Him and obey His commands.[25](#)

This objection is caused by not paying attention to one of the conditions of the Divine grace (*luḥf*) and that is the absence of compulsion or coercion. Once the principle of free-will is supposed to be observed, *luḥf* cannot be the overall cause of faith and obedience; it is rather the effect of *luḥf* through the man’s free-will or will power.

Now, it is possible for a person who is under the sway of satanic inclinations, instincts and insinuations not to pay attention to the Divine grace and be inclined toward unbelief and sin by his own free-will. Unbelief and sin, therefore, cannot be the proof for the non-realization of grace by God.[26](#)

3. The role of *luḥf* is not more than generating motive for having faith and obedience on the obliged person (*mukallaf*) and to urge him to obey God. This is also possible without the Divine grace and God has also power on anything possible. In this case, the action of grace will be vain and senseless and this is incompatible with the Divine wisdom.[27](#)

Once this objection is made about *luḥf*, it will also be applicable to all matters related to the guidance of humanity. The goal of prophethood (*nubuwwah*), for instance, is nothing but informing mankind of the Divine laws and encouraging them to worship and render servitude to Him. Without prophethood, this is also possible and God has also power on anything possible. Hence, the sending of the prophets must be

vain and senseless.

The said objection, therefore, is applicable neither to the rule of *luṭf* nor to other matters because the Divine guidance is full of wisdom and based upon causation. Even if we deny the principle of causation and replace it with “the habit of Allah” (*‘ādāt Allāh*), as the Ash‘arīs do, still the said objection is not justifiable because there is no doubt that the Divine guidance has a specific system. Now, this system is based either on the principle of causation or the principle of “the habit of Allah”.

Review Questions

1. State the position of the rule of *luṭf* among the justice-oriented (*‘adliyyah*) theologians.
2. Write down the meaning of *luṭf* (grace).
3. State the classifications of *luṭf*.
4. What are the conditions of *luṭf*.
5. What are the *mu‘aqqil* and *muqarrab luṭf*?
6. Explain the classification of *luṭf* according to the agent (*fai‘il*).
7. Write down the first proof of the incumbency of *luṭf*.
8. Write down the second proof of the incumbency of *luṭf*.
9. Concerning God’s stipulation of the religious obligations, how many assumptions can be conceived of? Which of these assumptions is compatible with the rule of *luṭf*?
10. How can the rule of *luṭf* be inferred from the verses of the Qur’an?
11. Explain the rule of *luṭf* while taking into account the traditions of the Infallibles (*ma‘ṣūmīn*) (*‘a*).
12. Write down Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s objection to the rule of *luṭf* along with the refutation to it.
13. Write down the second objection to the rule of *luṭf* along with the refutation to it.
14. Write down the third objection to the rule of *luṭf* along with the refutation to it.

[1.](#) Shahristānī, *Al-Milāl wa ’n-Niḥāl*, vol. 1, p. 65.

[2.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[3.](#) *Al-Fihrist*, p. 175.

[4.](#) *Tajwīd* (literally, elocution) refers to the rules governing pronunciation during recitation of the Qur’an. [Trans.]

[5.](#) *Aqrab al-Mawḥid*, vol. 2, p. 1144; *Al-Mufradāt fī Gharaīb al-Qur’ān*, p. 450; *Al-Miṣbḥ al-Munīr*, vol. 2, p. 226; *Al-Mu‘jam al-Wasīl*, vol. 2, p. 826.

[6.](#) *Al-Dhakhīrah fī ‘Ilm al-Kalām*, p. 186.

- [7.](#) See Al-Ilḥiyyāt, vol. 2, pp. 47–48.
- [8.](#) Shaykh al-Ḥafṣī, Al-Iqtīdā fī 'l-I'tiqād, p. 78; Ibn Maytham al-Baṣrī, Qawā'id al-Marām, p. 118; 'Allamah al-Ḥillī, Kashf al-Murād, station (maqāad) 3, chap. 3, issue on grace.
- [9.](#) These two conditions are mentioned in most expressions of the theologians. See Shaykh al-Mufīd, Al-Nukta 'l-I'tiqādiyyah, p. 31; Kashf al-Murād, topic on grace; Qawā'id al-Marām, p. 117; Al-Iqtīdā fī 'l-I'tiqād, p. 77.
- [10.](#) Ibid.
- [11.](#) Kashf al-Murād, station (maqāad) 3, chap. 3, topic on grace.
- [12.](#) Qawā'id al-Marām, pp. 117–118.
- [13.](#) Gawhar-e Murād, p. 247.
- [14.](#) Mirzā Abī 'l-Ḥasan Sha'rīnī, Tarjumeh wa Sharḥ-e Kashf al-Murād, p. 460.
- [15.](#) Sīrat al-Zukhruf 43:32.
- [16.](#) Sīrat al-Zukhruf 43:32.
- [17.](#) Sīrat al-Imrān 3:159.
- [18.](#) Sīrat al-Hī 20:43–44.
- [19.](#) Sīrat al-Nisā' 4:165.
- [20.](#) Sīrat al-A'rāf 7:94.
- [21.](#) Biḥār al-Anwār, vol. 5, p. 316.
- [22.](#) Ibid.
- [23.](#) The utterance of Fiddaqah al-Ḥīrah (Fā'imah) ('a) is very similar to that of Imām 'Alī ('a) concerning the philosophy of creation and the Divine bounties. The same is true with regards to the other parts of her speech. This fact points to the correctness of the perfect compatibility of this couple. As stated in the tradition (ḥadīth), had there been no Imām 'Alī ('a), there could not have been found anyone who could duly be her husband. See Biḥār al-Anwār, vol. 43, section (bāb) 2, ḥadīth 11.
- [24.](#) Talkhīṣ al-Muḥaṣṣil, p. 342.
- [25.](#) Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Khamsah, p. 352, quoting Bashār ibn Mu'tamar.
- [26.](#) Kashf al-Murād wa Sharḥ Tajrīd Qawshajī, topic on grace.
- [27.](#) Talkhīṣ al-Muḥaṣṣil, p. 342 quoting Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.

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