

Lesson 39: The Final Cause

An Analysis regarding Free Actions

No free and willful deed (in the general senses of these terms) is performed without the consciousness and knowledge of the agent, regardless of whether this knowledge is the very essence of the agent, as in the case of the agent by self-disclosure (fa'il bil-tajalli), or whether this knowledge is the very action itself, as in the case of the agent by agreement (fa'il bil-ridha), or whether this knowledge is an implication of knowledge of the essence, as is believed in the case of the providential agent, or whether this knowledge is a separable accident of the essence, as in the case of the intentional agent.

Likewise there is no free and willful deed in relation to which the agent does not have some sort of affection (mahabbah), satisfaction, inclination and attraction, such that it is done with complete unwillingness, aversion and disgust. Even in the case of someone who takes bad tasting medicine with repugnance, or someone who decides to undergo surgery allowing a part of his body to be cut, the person who does these things does them because he has an interest in his own health, and his health is not to be obtained except through taking bitter medicines or cutting the infected part of the body. In this respect the taking of the medicine and the losing of one's hand are desired. This desire conquers the aversion to the bad taste and the discomfort of the loss of a limb.

The affection for and desire of a deed differ with the kinds of agents, and there are various concepts which are applied to them. Sometimes only the concept of affection is applicable, an affection which is the very essence of the agent, such as with the agent by self-disclosure.

Sometimes the concept of satisfaction (ridha) is applicable, such as with the agent by agreement (fa'il bil-ridha); sometimes the affection is an implication of the essence, as with the providential agent; and sometimes it is a kind of spiritual quality and is a separable accident of the essence, such as yearning (shawq), as with the intentional agent.

The most inclusive concept which includes all the cases is the concept of affection in the general sense. Its criterion is the perception of agreeability and the perfection of the beloved, and it may be termed

desirability. Therefore, it may be said that a voluntary action depends on the agent's considering the action to be agreeable with his own essence, and for this reason he desires it and likes it.

At last sometimes a voluntary agent possesses all of its own perfections, and his affection pertains to an action in so far as it is an effect of his own perfection, as in the case of completely immaterial things. Sometimes its affection pertains to a perfection it lacks, and the action is performed in order to obtain and reach that perfection, as with animal and human souls whose own voluntary actions are for the sake of reaching a state which is agreeable with their essences, and they obtain pleasure and benefit from it.

The difference between these two sorts is that in the first case the affection for the existing perfection (kamal-e mawjud) is the source of the performance of the action. However, in the second case, the affection for the 'absent perfection' (kamal-e mafqud) and yearning to obtain it is the source of the activity.

Also, in the first case, the existing perfection is the 'cause' of the performance of the action, and by no means may it be considered an effect, but in the second case the absent perfection is obtained by means of the action, and it may be considered a kind of effect of it. However, in both cases, the desire and affection for perfection is fundamental, and the desire and affection for the deed is subordinate.

Perfection and Goodness

A point to be noted is that what is meant by perfection here is an ontological attribute which is agreeable with the essence of the agent, which is sometimes the source of the performance of a voluntary action, and sometimes it comes into existence as an effect of the action. A perfection which is obtained as an effect of a willful action is sometimes the ultimate perfection of the agent or a preliminary for reaching it.

In this respect it is called real goodness (khayr-e haqiqi) in philosophical terms. Sometimes it is merely agreeable with one of the faculties and powers of the agent, however much it may interfere with other perfections and its ultimate perfection, and, on balance harm the agent, and in this case it is called imagined goodness (khayr-e maznun).

For example, a natural result of eating food is perfection for the vegetative faculty, which is common to man, animals and plants. The pleasure which is obtained through it is perfection for the faculty which perceives it, and it is common between man and animals. Moreover, if the eating of food is for a righteous intention, and in order to obtain power for the performance of one's divine duty, this will bring about a human perfection. In this case it will be a means of obtaining real goodness, as well.

However, if it is merely for animal pleasure, especially if prohibited foods are used, this will merely cause the perfection of some of a person's faculties, and will do harm to his ultimate perfection. In conclusion, it will not yield the real perfection of man. Hence, it is called 'fancied goodness' or 'imagined goodness.'

Furthermore, the situations appropriate to the use of the expressions 'freedom' (ikhtiyar) and 'goodness'

(khayr) have also become clear, for every voluntary agent performs only those deeds which are appropriate to his own perfection, and among the voluntary agents, intentional agents perform deeds which are means for achieving their own perfection and good, whether real or fancied, even if the supposed good is pleasure or escaping from pain and suffering.

It is possible that difficulties may be raised regarding the universality of this principle, for there may be people who are uninterested in worldly pleasures that at least perform some voluntary deeds for the good of others and pay no heed to their own good, and sometimes they even sacrifice their own lives for others.

So it cannot be said that generally, every intentional agent performs his deeds for his own good and to reach perfection!. The answer is that these sorts of deeds, whether they are performed due to the influence of the arousing of emotions, or for the sake of achieving an eternal reward or the pleasure of God, ultimately lead to the good of the agent himself; that is, as a result of such self-sacrifice, he either satisfies his emotions, or he attains to spiritual and heavenly stations and divine pleasure. So, the fundamental motivation of the agent is the attainment of his own perfection and goodness, and service to others is really a means for obtaining perfection.

At the utmost sometimes man's motivations are effective in a conscious form, sometimes semi-consciously, and sometimes unconsciously. For example, in cases where the emotions are aroused, the attention of man is drawn to the interests and benefits of others, and he no longer pays conscious attention to his own good and perfection, but this does not mean that it has no relevance at all.

The reason is that if he is asked why you perform such an act of self-sacrifice. He will answer, "Because I care," or "Because this deed is virtuous and humane," or "Because it will bring a spiritual reward or will lead to divine pleasure." So, the fundamental motivation will be the satisfaction of one's emotions, or taking pleasure in service to others, or to attain human virtue and perfection, or to achieve a heavenly reward and divine pleasure and nearness to God, even if the agent pays no conscious attention to this inner motivation when performing his deed.

The End and the Final Cause

From the explanation given regarding voluntary actions, it has become clear that such deeds in addition to being in need of an agent—their efficient cause being the essence of the agent—also depend on his knowledge and will. In the case of intentional agents, imagining such results of the intended deed as pleasure, benefit, goodness and perfection, inspires his yearning to perform it.

So, the decision to perform a deed depends on yearning pertaining primarily to the results of the deed, and secondarily to the deed itself. And the obtaining of this yearning is conditioned on the imagination of the deed and its results, and the affirmation of the desirability of the results. Since the result of the deed is primarily desired (as opposed to the deed itself which is secondarily desired), it is called the end

(ghayah), and knowledge of and affection for it are called the final cause ('illat-e gha'i). On this basis, a kind of cause called the final cause is established for the performance of a voluntary action.

It is necessary here to mention several important points.

1. The establishment of the final cause for every voluntary action does not mean that there necessarily occur in the essence of the free agent such things as knowledge, yearning, and decision. In other words, it is not necessary that the final cause be other than the efficient cause and supplementary to it; rather, this difference is specific to intentional agents, the source of whose knowledge and yearning is additional to their essences.

However, for some voluntary agents it is possible that either summary or detailed knowledge of the deed and its end, and also the primary affection for the end, as well as the secondary and subordinate affection for the action, be the very essence of the agent, or implications of it.

That which is necessary for all voluntary agents is knowledge and will in their general senses, whether they are identical with the essence or are additional to it, and whether the knowledge is presentational knowledge or acquired knowledge, and whether the will is the same as love of the essence, and consequently the same as the essence, or an action or a quality additional to the essence, and whether it is an implication of the essence, or a separable accident of it.

Hence the absence of a knowledge and will additional to the essence in some types of voluntary agents does not mean a negation of a final cause; rather it means the unity of the efficient cause and the final cause, as in complete immaterial existents, whose knowledge, affection, and other attributes of perfection are identical with their essence and are not other than the essence.

The identity of these attributes with the essence does not amount to a negation of knowledge, affection, power, life, and similar attributes.

2. Usually philosophers consider knowledge of the desired result or knowledge of the goodness of a deed to be its final cause, and sometimes they put this by saying that the imagination of the end or its mental existence is the final cause, and sometimes they also say that the whatness of the end which occurs with a mental existence before performing the deed is the final cause.

Likewise, they consider knowledge as the cause of the appearance of yearning, and say that knowledge brings about yearning. However, it seems that these expressions are not free of carelessness and it is best to call the final cause affection in its broadest sense, which in some cases appears in the form of agreeability and yearning, for it is the affection for goodness and perfection which drives the voluntary agent toward the performance of a deed, and knowledge is really a condition for its occurrence, not the creative cause of it.

It is clear that considering the whatness of the end as the final cause is not compatible with the

fundamentality of existence, although this kind of expression can be found among the Peripatetics, who believe in the fundamentality of existence.

3. The requirement of the agent's knowledge of and affection for the result of a voluntary deed does not mean that the agent must have detailed awareness of the deed and its result, nor does it mean that the result of the deed must really be the true desire and the real perfection and goodness of the agent.

Rather, a summary attention would suffice, and an error in determining what is good does not take away from the fact that the action is voluntary nor does it deprive it of a final cause. Therefore, for one who becomes accustomed to performing a deed it is not necessary to pay detailed attention to the deed, the manner of performing it, or its results.

Rather, actions performed by habit also enjoy a kind of knowledge of desirability, and this amount of knowledge suffices for them to be voluntary. Likewise, the origin of actions which are performed on the assumption of achieving some desired result is in reality affection for goodness, even if the goodness is merely imaginary, or if due to the influence of obstacles the desired conclusion is not obtained.

In reality, the final cause for such sorts of deeds is the wish for a kind of pleasure and goodness and the hope of achieving them.

4. The expression 'end' has another meaning which is applied to the final destination of motion, and equivocation may lead to possible errors, especially since in cases in which deeds are performed gradually and with motion, the desired result is obtained when the motion comes to an end. Among the mistakes which it is possible to make by confusing these two terms is that one may imagine that the essential end of motion is the primary desired goal of the agent itself and the very point at which motion comes to an end.

Since this is the final destination of motion, it should be the primary desired goal of the agent, while it is possible that something which is simultaneous with motion's coming to an end, which may be considered the accidental end in relation to motion, is the real primary goal of the agent, and the agent's first intention pertains to that very thing.

For example, someone who moves in order to meet a friend has as his primary destination the meeting with his friend—or rather his basic aim is pleasure which he derives from seeing his friend—whereas the essential end of the motion is that very point at which motion comes to an end, and the end of the moving thing as such is also reaching this same point, and meeting his friend at that location is considered to be the accidental end of the motion, not to mention the pleasure or benefit he obtains by it.

5. In view of the causal relation, in its general sense, among phenomena of the world, it is possible that the end of an action may be a means to achieve something else. This may also be a means to achieve yet a third thing.

For example, it is possible that in order to acquire knowledge a person may set out for a center of learning, and he takes the obtaining of knowledge to be a preliminary for the performance of his divine duties, and takes the performance of his divine duties as a means for obtaining nearness to God, the Exalted, which is the final perfection of man.

Such a person from the beginning has set the direction of his motion toward God, the Exalted, and his final cause is that same nearness to God, however many intermediate ends he may also have, each of which in its own turn is a means to a higher end. However, it is possible that a person's motivation for acquiring knowledge is merely to satisfy his instinct for curiosity.

In this case, the final cause will be that same motivation. It is possible that his primary intention is to reach wealth or worldly status through the employment of knowledge. Hence, the final end for each person is that very thing which is taken into consideration from the outset, and he performs the deed in order to achieve it.

If his deed leads to some other result to which he paid no attention at all, or attention to which had no effect on the performance of the deed, then this will not be the final cause of his deed.

From this discussion several conclusions may be obtained, the most important of which are as follows.

a. For an action, it is possible that there be several aims in series, and the closer aim will be a means to the following, and so on to the final aim.

b. Whether the result of an action is the aim does not depend solely on the causal relation between the action and its result, rather it also depends upon the attention (the intention) of the agent. From this the importance of the role of intention in value-laden actions becomes clear.

c. It is not possible for the various aims of an action to be infinite, for the intermediate aims depend on the final aim in order for them to be aims at all, and their desirability takes shape in the shadow of its desirability.

Until the agent pays attention to a final desire, he cannot take other things to be means for reaching it, for it is assumed that their desirability depends on the desirability of the final end. If we suppose that each aim is a means for another aim, all of them will be dependent, and the supposition of dependent things without something on which to depend is self-contradictory and impossible. So, there is no alternative but that something must be primarily desired, in order for other things to become desirable due to it.

In the case of human actions the case is clear, for all humans within themselves find with knowledge by presence that every deed they perform is for a specific final end. Moreover, man does not have the power for imagination of and attention to infinite cases, so as to be able to possess an infinite chain of aims.

6. Another kind of multiplicity can be conceived regarding final causes, and that is that several motivations all together may be effective in the performance of the deed, and it is even possible that each of them would suffice for performing the deed even if the other motivations it were not present.

In other words, it is possible for an agent to perform a deed for several parallel aims, or as the saying goes, “to kill two birds with one stone.”¹ Therefore, the conjunction of two final causes for the performance of one action is not impossible, unlike the conjunction of two parallel complete efficient causes.

¹. The literal Persian is “to hit two targets with one stone.”

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