

Lesson 4: Order in the Universe and Knowing God

One of the rational – and at the same time, simple and universal – ways of knowing God is to reflect on the order or design in the creation. This way has been given much importance in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, as this has also been continuously the focus of attention of the theologians (*mutakallimīn*), and in the contemporary period, it has also acquired more significance. [1](#)

The Definition and Types of Order

Naṭm (order or design) is a kind of relationship between two or more things. In *naṭm*, a relationship or interdependence is established among the parts of a phenomenon or among the members of an entity. As such, *naṭm* is inseparable with the principle of causation (*'illiyyah*). That is, whenever there is *naṭm*, the cause-and-effect relationship governs.

The cause-and-effect relationship that exists in *naṭm* is sometimes agent-based and outcome-based at other times. In the first case, the *naṭm* is called “cause-and-effect order” (*naṭm-e 'ill wa ma'āl*) or “agent-based cause” (*illat-e f'īl*) [where the emphasis is on the agent] while in the second case, the *naṭm* is called “outcome order” (*naṭm-e ghāyah*) or “outcome-based cause” (*'illat-e ghāyah*).

The relationship between the clouds, wind, and rain, the fineness of air, and the order that exists between them are examples of the first case while the relationship between the cornea, retina, iris and other parts of the eye which are essential for vision is an example of the second case. That is, the organic relationship or order of these parts in a given condition brings about vision or the power of sight. And seeing is the outcome (*ghāyah*) of this special relationship.

There is another type of *naṭm* which is called *naṭm-e istiṣnā'ī* (formal or structural order). This order is caused by a particular composition of the components of a phenomenon or an aggregate and since aesthetic value influences the human being and provides him with a pleasant portrait, it is called formal or approbational (*istiṣnā'ī*) order.

The difference between the abovementioned types of order is that what is taken into account in the agent-based order (*naʿm-e fā'il*) is that every effect or happening depends on a cause which precedes it and brings it into existence. Whether that cause has self-awareness and willpower or not is inconsequential in the said order.

In the outcome-based order (*naʿm-e ghā'ib*), however, not only the existence of the cause or causes of a phenomenon but also the element of self-awareness and willpower are taken into consideration, because among the hundreds or thousands of probable relations among the components of a phenomenon, only one of them can lead to a certain outcome determined for it. Therefore, the agent-based cause of such order must be self-conscious and has willpower.

In the formal or structural order (*naʿm-e istisnāʾ*), meanwhile, the focus is only the external or structural elegance of a phenomenon irrespective of it having a cause or none, and if it is has, whether it is self-conscious and goal-oriented, or not.

The Order of Outcome and the Argument of Design

From what has been said, it became clear that the existing order or design in the Argument of Design is the Order of Outcome (*naʿm-e ghā'ib*), because only the existence of such order which can lead man to the existence of the All-wise and All-powerful Creator, and not the other two types of order (agent-based and structural orders), because in these two types of order, as stated, the elements of self-consciousness and willpower are not requisites.

The order of outcome, however, necessitates consciousness and willpower. The fact that out of thousands of probable relationships, only one relationship can lead to a specific outcome or goal, and such an outcome or goal is materialized, leaves no room for any doubt that the existing relationship or order has a wise, powerful and independent Agent.

In this regard, Professor Muḥarrar (r)² has said, thus:

“The meaning of order applied in knowing God is the order caused by an Ultimate Cause and not the order attributable to an agent-based cause. The order attributable to an agent-based cause is nothing but to say that every effect or consequence necessitates a cause or agent. Naturally, if it is also the effect of another cause and the said cause is also the effect of yet another cause – and so on and so forth – inevitably, there exists an order among them – a chain-like order. This order cannot be a proof of the existence of God.

But the order caused by an Ultimate Cause means that the effect has a condition or state which bespeaks of the existence of freewill in the cause. That is, it has a condition or state which can bring about the effect into existence in other forms but it has brought it into existence in a specific form for a particular purpose it has. So, in the case of the Cause, it must have consciousness, perception and

willpower so as to identify the objective and to discern the function of a given structure or condition for the said objective, and finally, to bring the said effect into existence for the said objective.

The principle of the ultimate cause is only possible when the cause that brings the effect into existence has consciousness, perception and willpower, or if the agent itself has no consciousness, perception and willpower, it is under the control and supervision of a Superior Agent that manages it and leads it toward the objective intended for it. The order which exists in the universe and is the proof of the existence of God is exactly this order.”[3](#)

It is Design and Not Accident!

One cannot deny the existence of order or design in the universe. All branches of science testify to the existence of this order or design in the universe. Scientists have different definitions of “the scientific method” but most of them accept that science is meant to discover the universal rules and laws of nature. Obviously, the hierarchy of laws discovered earlier by sciences ascertains the existence of these laws. Now, our freedom to conduct research allows us to ask why these laws exist. That is, how can we explain the existence of this order, hierarchy and usefulness of the laws of nature? In this regard, there are only two possibilities:

1. This order or design is the product of expansion and continuity of the universe which incidentally came into existence at the beginning, and
2. The order or system in nature is the product of an accurate design which has created it.

The first assumption is unbelievable. Therefore, the second assumption must be accepted and the existence of a powerful and all-wise Creator be acknowledged.[4](#)

The primary components of living bodies are three elements, viz. hydrogen, oxygen and carbon, and some amount of nitrogen and very small quantities of other elements that are combined with them. In simple and small organisms, millions of atoms of such elements exist and are combined together in specific proportions and forms.

In terms of probability, the chance or accident of having a given outcome is so insignificant and as good as zero. Now, let us consider the most complex of organisms, i.e. the human being, who wants to discover or manipulate the laws of nature. Is it possible for this being to have accidentally come into existence through a spontaneous combination of those elements?!![5](#)

Imam al-Ḥafḍīq (ʿa) and the Proof of Order

As part of his detailed discourse with Mufaḥḥal ibn ʿUmar about the existence of God and its proofs, Imam al-Ḥafḍīq (ʿa) has mentioned the order and perfection in the universe, saying thus:

“The structure of the universe is the foremost directive and argument for the existence of Almighty Allah – how the parts thereof have been set together and have been possessed of elegant workmanship and design. An appropriate mood of contemplation with reason focused on individual parts will disclose that this universe is comparable to a house furnished with all articles necessary for human beings. The sky is like a canopy; the earth is spread like a carpet, while the stars set in stratum upon stratum, appear as lamps alight in their places. The gems are treasured as if the house has lots of collections [of beautiful things]. Besides these, everything is readily available to meet individual needs.

Man, in this world, is like the masterful owner of the house, having in his possession everything therein. And there exist the different plant species available for meeting individual needs... Different species of animals have been allotted functions for particular exigencies and interest... This order and arrangement is a clear proof that the universe has been designed and created on the basis of decree, wisdom, order, and harmony.”⁶

Review Questions

1. Write down the definition of order and its types.
2. Explain the intended order in the argument of design.
3. How do we prove that the existing order in the universe is a design and not an accident?
4. Write down Imām al-ʿAḍḍī's (ʿa) discourse about the argument of design.

^{1.} The argument of design has a particular history and development in Christian theology. For further information in this regard, see the book *God in Philosophy or Science and Religion* (1968) by Ian Graeme Barbour (1923–), a prominent American scholar on the relationship between science and religion whose 1989–91 Gifford Lectures yielded the widely recognized texts, *Religion in an Age of Science* (1990) and *Ethics in an Age of Technology* (1993).

^{2.} The abbreviation, “r” stands for the Arabic invocative phrase, *raḥmatullāh ‘alayhi*, *raḥmatullāh ‘alayhā*, or *raḥmatullāh ‘alayhim* (may peace be upon him/her/them), which is mentioned after the names of pious people. [Trans.]

^{3.} Murtaḥḥ Muḥahhar, *Tawḥīd*, pp. 79–80.

^{4.} John Kelur Munisma (?), *Itḥḥt-e Wujūd-e Khud* (Proving the Existence of God), trans. Aḥmad ḥrḥm, pp. 224–226, with a slight terminological modification.

^{5.} *Ibid.*, pp. 179–180.

^{6.} ‘Allāmah Majlisī, *Biḥḥr al-Anwār*, vol. 3, p. 62.

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