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Lesson 64: The Unity of Divine Actions

Introduction

In the previous lesson we explained Unity (tawhid) in the sense of the denial of partners in the necessity of existence, and also in the sense of the denial of multiplicity within the essence of God. Meanwhile, we indicated the denial of difference between the attributes and the essence of God, which will be explained in the discussion of the attributes of God. However, a polytheism (shirk) which was and is common among different groups of polytheists is polytheism regarding creation, and especially regarding the management of the cosmos.

The previous discussions are not sufficient to refute this, for it is possible that in accepting Unity in the previous sense one believes that the unique Necessary Existent created only one or several creatures and has no other role in the creation of other creatures and the management of their affairs, which is performed by those who are not themselves necessary existents, and that they are independent and needless of God for the creation and management of other phenomena. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss Unity in creation and lordship separately.

Unity in Creation and Lordship

In order to prove Unity in creation and to deny partners with God in the creation and management of the cosmos, the ancient philosophers reasoned that creation is not restricted to direct and immediate creation, and God, who creates the first creature directly and immediately, also creates its actions and creations by the mediation of it. Even if there are hundreds of intermediaries, all of them are also created by God through mediation.

In philosophical terms: “the cause of the cause is also the cause, and the effect of the effect is also the effect.” In reality, by adding this premise to the demonstrations for the Necessary Existent, they established that the entire cosmos is His effect.

However, on the basis of the principles of transcendent theosophy, and especially regarding the principle of the dependence of the existence of the effect and lack of independence in relation to the creative cause, this issue becomes clearer and stronger. It is concluded that although every cause possesses a kind of relative independence in relation to its effect, all causes and effects in relation to Almighty God are poverty itself, dependence and need, and do not possess any sort of independence.

Therefore, true and independent creativity is restricted to God Almighty, and all existents are in need of Him in all their own aspects and in all states and times. It is impossible for an existent to be needless of Him in any of its existential aspects or to be able to do anything independently.

This is one of the most brilliant and valuable outcomes of Islamic philosophy, which was presented to the world of philosophy in the blessed and radiant thought of Sadr al-Muta'allihin. Likewise, philosophers have constructed other demonstrations for unity in creation and lordship which are based on numerous theoretical premises, and in order to prevent prolongation of the discussion, they will be ignored. A demonstration from the Noble Qur'an will suffice:

If there had been in them any gods except Allah, they [i.e. the heavens and earth] would both have certainly been in a state of disorder. (21:22).

This demonstration has been presented in several versions, and among the clearest and closest to the purport of the ayah is the one presented below:

This argument is composed of two premises:

1. The existence of every effect is dependent on its own cause. In other words, every effect obtains its existence with all its aspects and associations from its own creative cause. If it needs conditions or preparation their existence must also depend on its creative cause.

Therefore, if two or several creative causes are assumed to be on the same level, the effects of each of them will be dependent on its own cause, and will not possess any sort of dependence on other causes or on their effects. In this way, there will be no relation or dependence among their effects.

2. The design of the observable world (the heavens and the earth and their phenomena) is a single design in which all phenomena, whether they are simultaneous or not, are related and dependent on each other. The relations among simultaneous phenomena are various mutual causal influences which cause changes and alterations in them, and these are absolutely undeniable.

The relations among the phenomena of the past, present and future are such that the past phenomena prepare the ground for the appearance of the present phenomena, and the present phenomena, in turn, prepare the ground for the appearance of future phenomena.

If the causal and preparatory relations among the phenomena of the cosmos were removed, no cosmos would remain at all, and no other phenomena could take place. Just as, if the relation between the

existence of man with the air, light, water and nourishment were cut off, man would no longer survive. He would no longer be able to prepare the ground for the appearance of other men or other phenomena.

From the combination of these two premises it may be concluded that the design of this cosmos, which includes a collection of uncountable phenomena of the past, present and future, is the creation of a single Creator, and under the wise control of a single Lord. For if there were one or more other creators, there would be no relation among them, and no single design would be decreed by them. Rather, every creature would be brought about by its own creator, and would grow up with the help of other creatures of that same creator.

In conclusion, numerous and independent designs would be brought about, and no relations would hold among them, while the present design of the cosmos is a single and interconnected design the connections among whose phenomena are observed.

Finally, the point must be noted that creation and lordship are inseparable, and the nurture and control of a single existent is not separate from its creation and the creation of the things it needs. For example, providing for man is not something separate from creating his digestive system, the creation of nourishment and a livable environment.

In other words, these kinds of concepts are abstracted from the relations between creatures and have no instances other than their creation. Therefore, by proving unity in [the act of] creation, Unity in controlling affairs and other aspects of lordship are established.

Unity in the Emanation of Existence

Likewise, another meaning of Unity is the restriction of independent influence and the emanation of existence to the sacred divine essence, for which there is much evidence in the verses of the Qur'an and narrations from the Prophet (S) and Imams ('a), and this is established by attending to the demonstration which is formulated on the basis of the principles of transcendent theosophy for the Unity of creation and lordship. However, some misunderstandings exist in this area which must be attended to in order to keep from going to extremes.

On the one hand, a group of theologians (Ash'arites) deny that intermediate causes have any efficacy at all, on the basis of the literal meaning of a group of verses of the Qur'an and narrations from the Prophet (S). They basically deny the causality and effectiveness of these causes, and they consider God to be the direct agent of all phenomena. They hold that divine habits bring determinate phenomena into existence in certain circumstances, otherwise other things and conditions have no effect on their coming about.

On the other hand, another group of theologians (Mu'tazilites) hold that there is a kind of independence in the effectiveness [of intermediate causes], especially for those agents which are considered to be

voluntary. They consider it to be incorrect to relate the voluntary actions of man to God. This is one of the most basic differences between these two schools of thought.

Although philosophers considered it correct to relate phenomena through intermediaries even the voluntary actions of man to God, they justified it only on the basis of the fact that the Necessary Existent is the cause of all causes, until Sadr al-Muta'allihin provided the correct explanation of causal relations and proved that since intermediary causes themselves are the effects of God, they possess no independence, and basically, the emanation of existence, in the precise meaning of the word, is specific to God Almighty.

Other causes are like the channels of the emanation of existence; possessing different levels they play the role of intermediaries between the main source of existence and other creatures. Therefore, the meaning of the famous expression, "There is no influence in existence but Allah," will be that independent influence and emanation of existence is specific to God Almighty.

It is this fact which is explained in the language of the verses of the Qur'an and narrations from the Prophet (S) and Imams ('a) as the dependence of all things, even the voluntary actions of man, on the Divine Will, permission, decree and ordinance. In fact, these cases show the different stages which are considered by the intellect in order to trace phenomena to the sacred divine essence.

In a sense, these explanations can be considered stages of teaching, for the understanding of the precise meaning of Unity in actions by those who are not sufficiently trained in intellectual problems is no easy matter, and the best method of teaching it is one which includes several stages.

The Refutation of Compulsion and Delegation

One of the problems which have caused the Mu'tazilites to deny that the voluntary actions of man can be traced to God is that they have supposed that otherwise man would have to be necessarily compelled in absolutely all his actions. In addition to the fact that it is counterintuitive and contrary to what is self-evident, this assumption leaves no room for duty and guidance nor reward and punishment.

All of these would be empty notions. In this way the problem of compulsion and delegation has been presented in Islamic theology (kalam). The two sides of the issue have been the subject of numerous discussions, a review of all of which would require an independent book. Here we shall review only that which is relevant to our discussion.

The mentioned problem can be presented in the following version. Every voluntary action has an agent which performs it by its own will and volition. It is impossible for a single action to be performed by two agents and to be dependent on the wills of each of them.

Now, if the actions of man are dependent on his own will and volition, there will remain no room for them to depend on Almighty God, unless in the sense that God is the Creator of man, and if He had not

created him and had not given him the power of will and volition, man's voluntary actions would not occur. But if we consider them to be dependent on the Divine Will, we must deny their dependence on man's will. Man will be considered as merely an involuntary subject for the occurrence of divine actions. This is compulsion, which is invalid and unacceptable.

The answer is that taking a single action to depend on the will of two agents is impossible only in case both of the agents are assumed to influence its performance on the same level as each other, in technical terms, they would be 'parallel agents.' But if both agents are vertically related to each other, the dependence of an action on both of them is unproblematic.

The dependence [of an action] on two agents which are vertically related does not merely mean that the principle of the existence of the immediate agent depends on a mediating agent, but in addition to this, that every aspect of the existence of the immediate agent depends on the creative agent, and that even in the performance of voluntary actions they are not without need of Him. At every moment they obtain their existences and all the aspects of their existences from Him.

This is the correct meaning of the saying: "No compulsion and no delegation, but something in between these two things" (La jabr wa la tafwidh, bal amr bayn al-amrayn). As was earlier mentioned, the correct understanding of this saying is possible in the shadow of the correct understanding of the causal relation and the dependence of the existence of the effect, whose originality is one of the merits of the explanation given by Sadr al-Muta'allihin.

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