

[Home](#) > [Philosophical Instructions](#) > [Part 7: Theology](#) > [Lesson 65: The Divine Attributes](#) > Attributes of Essence and Attributes of Action

Lesson 65: The Divine Attributes

Introduction

Regarding the limits of human abilities to know God, and the attributes which can be attributed to the divine essence there are various tendencies, some of which go to one extreme and some to another. For example, relying on some ambiguous verses of the Qur'an and narrations attributed to the Prophet (S), some relate attributes and actions of material existents, such as sadness, happiness, going and coming, and sitting and rising, to God the Supreme. They are called in technical terms *mujassimah* (those who believe in corporeal attributes) and *mushabbihah* (those who believe in the similarity between God and creatures).

Others have absolutely denied the power of man to know the essence and attributes of Almighty God. They rely on another set of narrations and verses of the Qur'an, and they take the attributes and actions related to God Almighty to be negative. For example, they have interpreted knowledge as the negation of ignorance and power as the negation of weakness. Some have even expressed the view that attribution of existence to God, the Supreme, does not mean anything but the denial of nothingness!

In the midst of this, there exists a third tendency which chooses a way between the extremes of similarity and abstraction. This tendency is agreeable to reason and is confirmed by the Immaculate Imams (Peace be upon them). We shall explain something about this tendency.

The Limits to Knowing God

It was previously said that knowledge of God, the Supreme, may be divided into two types: presentational intuitive knowledge, and acquired intellectual knowledge. Presentational knowledge has different levels, the lowest of which exists in every human being, and with the perfection of the soul and focusing the

attention of the heart, it becomes strengthened, until it reaches the level of the knowledge possessed by

the Friends of God (awliya') who see Him with the eye of the heart more clearly than any thing and prior to every thing. But, in any case, the presentational knowledge of any 'arif (gnostic, mystic) is measured by his existential relation and the relation of his heart to God, The Supreme.

No one is ever able to completely comprehend the divine essence and know Him as He Himself knows Himself. The reason for this is clear, because every existent other than the sacred divine essence is limited in its ontological level, even if it is infinite with respect to time or in some other ontological aspects. The comprehension of the infinite by the finite is impossible.

Acquired intellectual knowledge is obtained by mental concepts and its level is subordinate to the power of the mind to precisely analyze and understand subtle intellectual concepts. It is this kind of knowledge that can be perfected by learning the rational sciences.

At the same time, the clarity of the soul, purification of the heart, refinement of morals and elimination of materialistic and animalistic pollutions play an important role in elevating this knowledge. Anyway, all intellectual and spiritual perfections are due to the grace of God.

The Role of Reason in Knowing God

Undoubtedly, the tools for the work of the intellect are mental concepts, and basically, the intellect is that power which understands universal concepts.

As was explained in the section on epistemology, intellectual concepts are divided into two general groups: one group is that of whatish concepts or primary intelligibles, which are automatically abstracted from particular individual objects of perception, and which denote their ontological limits; another group is that of concepts which are obtained through the activities of the intellect itself, and although they may originate in some kind of individual and presentational perceptions, these concepts are not limited to the framework given by the perceptions, and they can be extended or limited.

All intellectual knowledge about existence and its levels and about everything which is not of whatness, and which is about metaphysics is obtained with the help of these concepts, just as the concepts of nothingness and negation are of this sort.

With this point it becomes clear that whatish concepts, which are representations of the limitations of contingent existents, are not applicable to God, but other intellectual concepts can be considered means for knowing the divine attributes and actions on the condition that they possess sufficient breadth and universality and are free from the taint of imperfection and contingency, as are the concepts of the Necessary Existent, the Creator, the Lord, and the other most beautiful divine names.

It must be observed that these kinds of concepts are graded and possess multiple instances, and there is an incomparable and immeasurable difference between the instances of such concepts in the case of God and in the case of their other instances, for it is a difference between the finite and the infinite.

It is for this reason that when they taught about the attributes of God, the Supreme, the immaculate Imams, Peace be upon them, used these concepts with the proviso of transcendence and denial of similarity to the attributes of created entities. For example, they said, “He is the Knower, but not as we know, the Powerful, but not as we are powerful,” and this is the meaning of the words of Almighty God:

There is nothing like Him. (42: 11)

Positive and Negative Attributes

Concepts can be divided generally into the positive and the negative. Positive concepts sometimes denote limited existents or their aspects of limitation and deficiency, so that if their aspects of limitation and deficiency were neglected they would change into other concepts, such as all whatish concepts and a set of non-essential concepts which indicate the weakness of the level of existence and its deficiency and limitedness, such as the concepts of potentiality and disposition.

It is self-evident that such concepts cannot be posited of God, the Supreme, but their negations can be considered as negative attributes, such as the negation of partners with God, composition, corporeality, and time and space.

Another set of positive concepts denote the perfection of existence, and do not include any aspect of deficiency or limitation, although it is possible for them to be applied to limited instances, as well, like the concepts of knowledge, power and life. These kinds of concepts can be related to God, the Supreme, as positive attributes on the condition that the instance is considered devoid of limitation. Their negations would be incorrect because this would imply the negation of perfection of a perfect infinite existent.

Therefore, all of the concepts which denote ontological perfections and do not include a sense of deficiency or limitation can be established as positive attributes for God, the Supreme. Likewise, the negation of all concepts which include a kind of deficiency and limitation can be considered as negative attributes of the Necessary Existent. If the absence of the application of false names to God, the Supreme, is emphasized, this is for the sake of preventing the application of concepts which include a sense of deficiency or limitation.

Those who interpret the positive attributes of God, the Supreme, in a negative sense, have imagined that in this way they can achieve an absolute transcendence and prevent the relation to God of concepts which are applied to contingent existents, while, firstly, the negation of one of two contradictories is the affirmation of the other, and if they are not willing to commit themselves to the affirmation of one of these imperfections, they will have to allow that neither of two contradictories is true, and secondly, when, for example, knowledge is interpreted as the denial of ignorance, in fact, the sense of non-being in ignorance is negated from the divine arena, and the assumption of the sense of non-being is impossible without the assumption of its opposite, knowledge. Hence, they must have posited knowledge at a prior level.

Attributes of Essence and Attributes of Action

Attributes related to God, the Supreme, are either concepts which are abstracted from the divine essence by focusing on a kind of ontological perfection, such as knowledge, power and life, or they are concepts which are abstracted by the intellect through a comparison between the divine essence and His creatures, focusing on a kind of ontological relation, such as being the Creator or Lord.

The first group of concepts is called attributes of essence, while the second group of concepts is called attributes of action. Sometimes the attributes of essence are defined as those attributes which are abstracted from the station of the essence, and the attributes of action are defined as attributes abstracted from the station of action.

Relating the attributes of essence to God, the Supreme, does not mean that there exists something other than the divine essence, within it or outside it, so that the essence could be considered separate from and in lack of these attributes, contrary to the case of material entities, for example, which can be imagined to lack some specific color, odor or shape.

In other words, the divine attributes are not additional to nor other than the essence, but rather, when the intellect considers one of the ontological perfections, such as knowledge or power, it posits the highest level of this perfection for the divine essence, since His existence, in its very simplicity and unity, possesses all of the infinite perfections, and no perfection can be negated of Him.

In a third sense, the attributes of essence of the Necessary Existent are intellectual concepts abstracted from a single instance without indicating any kind of multiplicity or plurality for the divine essence. This fact is sometimes expressed in these words: 'The perfection of tawhid is the denial of attributes for Him' (Kamal al- tawhid nafi al-sifat 'anhu) as is narrated from the Commander of the Faithful, 'Ali, Peace be with him.

In this field there are two extremist tendencies. On one hand there are the Ash'arites who imagined that the divine attributes are entities outside the essence, and at the same time uncreated, so they held that there are 'eight preeternal things' (qudama' thamaniyyah). On the other hand, the Mu'tazilites held that attributes are to be negated, and that their attribution to God is figurative.

However, the first position implies that, God forbid, either they accept partnership in the necessity of existence, or they believe in the existence of existents which are neither necessary nor contingent existence!

The second position implies that the divine essence lacks ontological perfections, unless their statements are interpreted as arising from inadequacy of expression and they are taken to have meant the negation of attributes being additional to the essence.

Likewise, ascribing attributes of action to God does not mean that aside from the existence of God and

that of His creatures, there are other entified things called attributes of action and that they are attributed to God, the Supreme.

Rather, all of these attributes are additional concepts which are abstracted by the intellect by a special comparison between the existence of God, the Supreme, and the existence of His creatures. For example, when the dependence of the existence of creatures on God is considered, the concepts of the Creator, the Originator, and the Initiator are abstracted from a certain perspective.

Therefore, the characteristic of the attributes of action is that in order to abstract them, the existence of creatures must be taken into consideration from a certain perspective. In other words, these attributes rest on a relation and the consideration of the connection between God and creatures.

This relation rests on both its terms and with the negation of one of them it would not occur. Therefore, sometimes these attributes are called relational attributes (*sifat idhafiyyah*). It may be concluded that the attributes of action cannot be considered the same as the divine essence, just as they cannot be considered specific entified entities.

A noteworthy point is that material phenomena possess temporal and spatial limits and conditions, and these limits and conditions influence the relations which are taken to hold between them and God, and as a result, the actions which are dependent on them are in one sense conditioned by time and space.

For example, it is said that God, the Supreme, created the existent *x* at time *t* and location *l*, but these conditions and limits in fact refer to creatures and are considered to be the receptacle for the occurrence of the creature and its aspects. They do not imply the ascription of time and space to God.

In other words, divine actions, which are dependent on time and space, possess two aspects: one is the aspect relating to creatures, due to which time and space are attributed to them; the other aspect is related to God, the Supreme, with respect to which the actions of God are free of time and space. This point is worthy of much attention, and is the key to the solution of many problems.

Another point is that if the attributes of action are considered in terms of their source, and, for example, by the 'Creator' is meant one who has the power to create (*Kawn al-wajib hayth yakhluq idha sha'*), but not one who has performed the act of creation, in that case, they will be reduced to attributes of essence.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/philosophical-instructions-muhammad-taqi-misbah-yazdi/lesson-65-divine-at-tributes>