

Part 1: The Perfect Man

The subject under discussion is about the perfect man from the Islamic perspective.

A perfect man means an exemplary human being, who is superior and exalted, or any other inference of the sort. Like everything else, a human being may be perfect, or he may be imperfect, regardless of normal functioning, or, being deficient. However, a normally functional person could be perfect, or imperfect.

It is necessary for Muslims to know the definition of a perfect human being from the viewpoint of Islam because it would serve as a model and example, by emulating what we can by trying to attain our perfection per Islamic teachings.

Therefore, we should know what is meant by a perfect man? How he appears spiritually and intellectually, with his peculiarities, in order that we may improve ourselves, and our society based on that model? If we do not know the Islamic definition of a perfect human being, we cannot become a perfect Muslim, or even a relatively perfect human being.

From the viewpoint of Islam, there are two ways of knowing a perfect person: One way is to refer, firstly, to the Holy Qur'an, and secondly, to the traditions (Hadith), for definitions of a perfect man meant to be a best practising Muslim. A perfect Muslim is a person who has attained perfection in Islam; a perfect believer is one who has attained perfection in his faith. Now, we must see how the Holy Qur'an and tradition have portrayed such a person, and with which peculiar attributes. To be considerate, we have many things to quote from both of these sources.

The second way is to regard a real individual who is built up on the model of the Holy Qur'an and Islam, and not an imaginary phantasmal being; but a real and objective personality who exists in various stages of perfection: at its highest level, or, even at slightly lower stages.

The holy Prophet (S) himself is an example of a perfect man in Islam. Imam 'Ali ibn Abu Talib is another example. The process of knowing 'Ali (a.s.) reveals a perfect man, meaning that one knows him thoroughly, and not only his name, lineage and apparent identity. We may know that 'Ali is the son of

Abu Talib and the grandson of Abd'ul-Muttalib, and that his mother is Fatima, daughter of Assad-bin-Abd'ul-Ezi, and his wife is Fatima Az-Zahra' (a.s.), and he is the father of Imam Hassan (a.s.), and Imam Husayn (a.s.), and the dates he was born and died, and the battles he fought etc. But, this knowledge is not about him as a perfect man. Recognition of 'Ali means knowing his personality, rather than his person.

Once we'll get acquainted with his entire personality, we will know him as a perfect man of Islam to the extent that we'll take him as a model, and accept him in actuality, and not limited as our leader and Imam in literal sense. Following to emulate him, we will be true Shi'a follower of this perfect man.

Shi'a means one who follows 'Ali, not only with words and sentiments, but by practising the philosophical and academic terms lead by 'Ali.

These two ways of recognition of the perfect man are practically useful, but we must use this knowledge to follow the ways shown by Islam to become a true Muslim, and make society truly Islamic.

However, the question arises as to the meaning of 'Perfect'. Some things may seem obvious, but explicit things are sometimes harder to explain than complicated matters.

In Arabic the two words meaning 'Perfect' and 'complete' are close to each other but not exactly interchangeable in meaning, and both of them have an antonym meaning 'defective'. The difference between the two words is as follows: The word 'complete' refers to something which is prepared according to a plan, like a house and a mosque, and if any part of it is unfinished, it is incomplete, or, defective. But something may be 'complete'; yet, there may exist a higher degree of completion, or, many degrees higher than that, and that is called 'perfection'. 'Complete' is a horizontal progress to maximum development, and 'perfect' is a vertical climb to the highest degree possible.

When we speak of 'perfect wisdom, or, knowledge', it refers to a higher degree of an already existing wisdom or knowledge. A man may be complete in a horizontal sense, without being perfect vertically. There are people who are half-complete, or, even less than that. But when perfection is attained, there are still higher levels of perfection until a perfectly "perfect" state is achieved.

The term 'perfect' did not exist in Islamic literature until the seventh century of the *Hijra*. It is now used frequently in Europe, but was first used in the Islamic world by the well-known Gnostic "Mohyedin Arabi Andalusī Ta'i", who is the father of Islamic Gnosticism, and many Islamic Gnostics, including Iranian and Persian-speaking ones, and including his pupils like Rumi. Rumi with all his greatness is of lesser calibre compared to Mohyedin, in Gnosticism. He is of Arab descent, and from progeny of Hatem Ta'i, from Andalusia, that is modern-day Spain. He travelled around the Islamic countries, and passed away in Damascus where he was buried. He had a pupil called Sadredin Ghownawi who is rated second to his teacher as a Gnostic. Islamic Gnosticism has been introduced with complexity by Mohyedin, and commentaries of Sadredin. Rumi is a contemporary of the latter and his follower through whom he imbibed the ideas of Mohyedin.

Rumi used the term "perfect man" from the aspect of Gnosticism, but we intend to discuss it from the perspective of the Holy Qur'an. We have human beings who are physically sound, or, defective. But you do not consider blindness, deafness, paralysis, or, shortness of breath as defects of virtue, personality or humanity. For example, Socrates, the famous Greek philosopher, who is suspected to be a prophet, was considered the ugliest man, but his ugliness is not counted as a defect. Abu'l-Ala Mu'arra, and Taha Husayn of our time were blind. Is blindness a defect in personality? This means that a person has physical attributes as well as spiritual ones, each of them distinct from the other. It is a mistake to suppose that the spirit is dependent on the physical body. Can the spirit be sick while the body is sound or not? This is a question in itself. Those, who deny the genuineness of the spirit and believe spiritual peculiarities to be the direct influence of the nervous system, have no belief in the spirit and for them everything is dependent on the body. According to them if the spirit is sick, it is because the body is sick, and mental sickness is, in fact, related to physical sickness.

Fortunately, it has been proved today that even though the body may be healthy in terms of blood composition, nerves, vitamins, etc., it can still cause one to be mentally ill, such as suffering from what is called a "complex", or disorder. Consequently, the method of treating mental illness may not be medicine and drugs at all (physical). Can we find a drug for someone who is suffering from narcissism, which is a kind of mental disorder? Can we change a person's haughtiness into modesty, or, his cruelty into kindness by means of a pill, or, an injection? It is deprivations, which produce such illnesses, and cause someone, for instance, not to rest until one takes revenge.

What is the feeling of revenge? What is the envy which rouses a person to dislike other people's enjoyment of a blessing, and long to deprive them from it? Such a man is not thinking of having that blessing for himself. The envy of a sound person always gives priority to his own goal(s), and this is not his fault. But desiring ill and defeats for others, is an ailment. You may observe that such individuals are prepared to harm another person to the extent that they hurt themselves wholly.

A historical story is presented in relation to such envy. At the time of a caliph, a rich man bought a slave whom he treated from the beginning, like a gentleman, giving him the best of food, and clothes, and money, as he would do to his own child, and, at times even more lavishly. But, the slave noticed that his master always felt uneasy. Eventually he made up his mind to set him free, and provide him with some capital. One night as they were sitting together, the master said: "Do you know why I have treated you so well?" The slave asked the reason. The master said: "I have one request to make which if you fulfil, you would enjoy all I have given and could have possibly given you! But if you refuse, I will be disappointed with you." The slave said: "I will obey whatever you ask. You are my benefactor who has given me my life." The master said: "You must promise me in good faith to do it, for I am afraid you may refuse it." The slave said: "I promise to do what you wish."

The master said: "My proposal is that you must behead me at a specific time and place." The slave exclaimed: "What? How can I do that?" The master said: "That is what I desire." The slave said: "That is

impossible." The master said: "I have got your promise. You must do it." Once it became midnight, he awakened the slave and gave him a sharp knife, and a bag full of money, and climbed up the neighbour's roof and told the slave to behead him there then go wherever he liked. The slave asked the reason for such an act. He answered: "I hate this one man and prefer death to seeing his face. We have been rivals but he has exceeded me and exceeded me in everything, so I am very jealous. I desire that he be jailed for this fake murder, and this punishment will be a relief to me. Everyone knows him to be my rival, so he will be blamed and condemned to death for this act." The slave said: "You seem to be a foolish man and deserve this death."

So, he beheaded the man and ran away. His rival was consequently arrested, and imprisoned, but, no one believed that he would have killed his rival on his own roof. It had become a mystery. In the end, the slave felt a prick in conscience, so he went to the authorities and confessed the truth. When they understood the matter, they freed both the slave and the neighbour.

It is a fact that envy is a disease. The Holy Qur'an says:

"He will indeed be successful who purifies it, and he will indeed fail who corrupts it." (Sura ash-Shams, 91: 9- 10).

Thus, the first proposal of the Holy Qur'an is purification of the self from ailments, complexes, ignorance, deviations and metamorphoses [*Metamorphosis means change in physical state?*]. You must have heard that in the past there were people who, because of their excess of sins, were cursed by the Prophets of their time and were thus metamorphosed, meaning, they were transformed into animals such as a monkey, a wolf, a bear etc.

One may not become physically metamorphosed, but he may be mentally, or, spirituality transformed into an animal, with such wickedness and nastiness which may not be found in the world. The Holy Qur'an speaks of those "who are in the worse errors" and who are lower than quadrupeds^{[1](#)}.

How can that happen? Man's personality depends on his ethical and spiritual qualities, without which he would be a non-conscientious beast. Thus, a defective man may be perceived lowered to the level of a metamorphosed being. Some may think this is a fantasy, but it is real and true.

Someone recalled: "We had made a pilgrimage to Mecca along with Imam Sajjad (a.s.), and when we looked down at the Desert of Arafat it was full of *Hajjis* (pilgrims). There were so many of them that year. The Imam said: "There is much uproar, but few are true pilgrims." The man says: "I don't know how the Imam gave me the insight, but when he asked me to look down again, I saw a desert full of animals, like that in a zoo, among whom a few human beings were moving about." The Imam told him how things looked to those who had a clear sight and were concerned with the inward concept/essence of things.

This is quite obvious, but, our so-called modernized mind being incapable of accepting it puts us at fault. In our own time, there have been, and are individuals, who have discerned the real character of others,

who appear like animals, as they know nothing except eating, sleeping and sexual intercourse (lusting). They had lost their higher human qualities (intellect), and been turned into beasts. We read in the Holy Qur'an:

"The day on which the trumpet shall be blown, so you shall come forth in hosts, and the heaven shall be opened so that it shall be all openings." (Sura an-Naba, 78- 6).

Religious leaders have accentuated that only one group of people will be raised from among the dead in the shape of human beings; others would appear as animals: tigers, monkeys, scorpions, snakes and ants. Does God do so without a reason? No, there are logical reasons. When a human being has done nothing in this world but mocked, and hurt others, he takes his real form in the next world as a scorpion. He who acts like a monkey in this world, will appear as a monkey in the next world. And, a person with a doggish nature will appear as a dog.

Thus, all people will be raised from the dead according to their past intentions, desires, and true character(s) in the finite world. Are your desires in this world those of a human being, or, a beast, or, a bird? If so, you will take that form on the day of resurrection. That is why we are forbidden to worship any but one God. If we worship anything else, we will have it with us in the hereafter. If we worship money it becomes part of our nature, and as the Holy Qur'an says that molten metal will be a punishment on the day of resurrection:

"And (as for) those who hoard up gold and silver and do not spend it in Allah's way, announce to them a painful chastisement, on the day when it shall be heated in the fire of hell, then their foreheads and their sides and their backs shall be branded with it; this is what you hoarded up for yourselves." (Sura at-Tawbah, 9: 34-35).

Do not be mistaken that currency (paper) notes have taken the place of coins; in the next world, these banknotes would be turned into a fire as scorching as gold and silver coins!

So, a human being with a psychological "complex" is deficient, and one who worships a physical matter (idols) is imperfect, and metamorphosed (on the day of judgement as well in this world as it may appear to only few enlightened among the blessed ones). The sense of Perfection in one kind of creature is different from perfection in another kind. A perfect human being is different from a perfect angel, and each creation has a separate degree of perfection that classifies it as "Perfect". Those who have told us of the existence of angels, say that they are created with pure intelligence, in which the earthly aspect like lust, anger, etc. are absent, whereas animals are wholly earthly, and lack what the Holy Qur'an terms as a "divine spirit".

But man is a mixture of the two, both angelic and earthly creation, both high and low. This is described in a narration in the book "Usul al-Kafi", and Rumi, the poet, has turned it into a poem of which the translation is as follows:

"A narration says that the Glorious God created three different groups of creatures: The first group is the

angels who are pure intellect, knowledge and liberty, and act only in prostration. They lack every element of greed and passion, but are pure light, and alive with the love of God. The second group, lacks knowledge altogether, and is fattened like the animals in the pasture, they see nothing but the shelter and fodder, and are ignorant of both vice and honour, The third group are human beings who are half angel and half donkey, the donkey half is inclined to the low and the other half is inclined to the sublime; one must see which half wins the day, and which one conquers the other,"

The Holy Qur'an says:

"Surely we have created man from a small life-germ uniting' (itself): We mean to try him, so we have made him hearing, seeing. Surely we have shown him the way. He may be thankful or unthankful."(Sura al-Insan, 76: 2-3).

This means that the man has been granted many talents, and left with free will to use discretion whether he deserves reward, or punishment by his actions. However, the other creatures do not possess such discretion, One must choose his own way and attain perfection through moderation and equilibrium and by employing all his talents.

A child grows up and is complete with all the organs, and limbs, and these develop harmoniously. But if he grows up cartoon-like, that are some parts develop to excess, and others do not grow at all or grow insufficiently, he cannot attain completion. But a harmonious and well-rounded development may result in a complete, and possibly perfect human being. *[perfection is replaced with completeness as perfection contradicts the definition of the author in my opinion, more appropriate would be "complete"]*

The Holy Qur'an says:

"And when his Lord tried Abraham with certain words, he fulfilled them. He said: Surely I will make you an Imam of men. Abraham said: And of my offspring? My covenant does not include the unjust, said He."(Sura al-Baqarah, 2: 124).

Abraham was tested in many ways, including his readiness to sacrifice his son for God, when a call from God said:

"And we called out to him saying: O Abraham! You have indeed shown the truth of the vision." (The Holy Qur'an, Sura as-Saffat, 37: 104).

When Abraham successfully passed through various trials, the Holy Qur'an said about him:

"Surely Abraham was an exemplar, obedient to Allah, upright, and he was not of the polytheists."(Sura an-Nahl, 16: 120).

He stood alone fighting against all unbelievers, and it was then that God called him an Imam, a leader and a model for others to follow. Imam 'Ali is a perfect man since all the human values have had their

maximum growth in him with synergy..

You have watched the low and high tide in the sea, which is caused by the gravitational attraction of the moon. The spirit of man, too, as well as that of society shows a similar tide-like movement. The human beings undergo such ebb and swell, and this attraction is sometimes to one direction to such an extent that all other values are forgotten. In this way, they are like defective beings that show growth in one aspect, and lack of it in other aspects. Society may lack harmony in its development; this is true that it is not wholly deviated but it is very often corrupted to certain degrees in one way or another.

One of the human values confirmed by Islam is devotion, which is communion with God. Of course, in Islam every act performed for God only, is devotion. Having a job and a trade to support oneself, and one's family, and to serve society is in itself a form of devotion. But devotion, in its special sense, is private communion with God in prayer, hymns, staying sleep deprived for vital (prayer) acts at nights etc., all of which are part of religion,. Sometimes, you see individuals, or, society being drawn only to one aspect of devotion; that is performing the obligatory and recommended acts of prayer, ablution etc., all of which, done in excess, will impede progress of society.

Commonly this way of devotion becomes ritualistic in sense in an Islamic society, and once one gets used to it, it is difficult to observe moderation. Such a person cannot say to himself that God has created him a human being, not an angel, and as a human being he should develop every aspect of himself harmoniously.

It was once reported to the Prophet that a number of his companions had sunk in devotion of such ritualistic kind. The Prophet felt uneasy. He came to the mosque, and exclaimed out loud: "O People, what has happened to some groups who have appeared among my people. Even I as your Prophet do not show devotion in this way to keep awake all night. I rest part of the night, and attend to my family. I do not observe fast every day."

Those who are following their new way have deviated from my tradition: " Thus, when the Prophet notices that an Islamic practice is about to corrupt other Islamic practices, he deals with such trend seriously. Amr ibn Aas had two sons called Abdullah, and Muhammad. The former was inclined towards practising true Islam, and advised his father to follow the way of 'Ali, while the latter, who like his father loved the world and position, urged his father to follow Mu'awiah. Abdullah was mostly inclined to devotion. One day, the Prophet met him on the way and said: "I hear that you spend the whole night in prayer and the whole day fasting." He replied in the affirmative. The Prophet said: "But I am not so, and I do not agree with your way."

Societies could be drawn towards asceticism. Asceticism is an undeniable value which must exist in a prosperous society. But, when everything in a society is based on asceticism and nothing else, there is something wrong with it. On the contrary, another value is to serve people, and it is fully supported in Islam, and by the Prophet, and the Holy Qur'an:

"It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the East and the West, but righteousness is this that one should believe in Allah...."(Sura al-Baqarah, 2: 177),

The verse ends emphasizing the value of serving God's creatures. But sometimes people go to excess and, as the poet Sa'di says: "Devotion is nothing but serving people". (but not excessive ritualistic devotion)

The next step is to the value of devotion, asceticism [*asceticism means excessive devotion which is ritualistic so it's not exactly exalted?*], knowledge, or, jihad, all of which are the exalted values for man in Islam. Today, some of our intellectuals imagine that they have found a very lofty principle called "humanity and humanitarianism". Serving people is fine, and we should serve them. But only providing the humanity with food and clothes would be treating them like animals, especially if one supposes no higher value(s) exist for them. If service is confined to this, what would be the difference between Abu Dharr and Mu'awiah? This is another example of going to excess, similar to the overvaluing of freedom. Freedom is among the highest of human values which is above man's animal nature, and material values. You can see that those who possess humanity are willing to endure hunger and nakedness, and live under harsh conditions, provided they are not enslaved by another human being and can live freely. A story is told in this regard in the book of "The Mirror of Scholars", about Avicenna who held the rank of a minister for some time.

One day, Avicenna was passing through a street with great pomp, and show when he noticed a scavenger removing putrid stuff from a pit. Avicenna heard him murmuring to himself a couplet meaning that he honoured his 'self' for finding his world easy. Avicenna laughed at the man who was doing the undesirable task so candidly. He drew the rein of his horse and called the man to him, and remarked sarcastically: "What a way to choose to honour the "self"! The man on recognizing Avicenna by his appearance said: "I have chosen this job so that I would not be the slave of another in the way you are! To enjoy freedom while being a scavenger is far better than your rank, assets, and dependence," It is said that Avicenna became red in the face with shame, and had no answer to give.

According to the worldly and animal aspirations, there is no point in forsaking the best food, and having servants and all that pomp and show, or, becoming a scavenger, and speaking of freedom. Is freedom something tangible? No, but for a vigilant conscience, it is so worthy that a man prefers scavenging for food to slavery. This value is sometimes forgotten in some societies, but when it is awakened in them, they claim freedom to be the only value, and forget about other values like justice, wisdom etc. Others may consider love as the only value, and forget the intellect, as the Gnostics do; while some go to the other extreme, thinking love to be a fancy, and intellect as the only worthy thing

Love, intellect, justice, freedom, service to humanity and devotion are all values. Who is a perfect human being? An absolute devotee, or ascetic, or, freeborn, or, in love, or, intelligent? None of these alone make a perfect man. But, if all these values are developed in him in a harmonious way, he may be considered perfect, and Imam 'Ali was such a man. In *Nahjul-Balagha* you meet mostly the eloquent

side of him, and in reading this book, you get different pictures of him. Sometimes reading his sermons, which are so vivid, you presume that Ali is actually there conducting in front of you. Similarly, you observe Rumi, or, Mohyedin Arabi speaking to you in person. When you analyze the narrative of Ferdowsi, or, a man of liberty, or an ascetic, or, a retiring devotee, is vividly expressed in a state of giving discourses. All human aspects show themselves in 'Ali's words; now, you discern how eloquent and truthful he is compared to our meagre sense of being.

About fifty years ago, our society was tuned, in religious matters, towards asceticism. Preachers often confined themselves to those sermons of *Nahjul-Balagha* which were related to ascetic matters, calling this world a transient place, and the next world eternal, and advising people to prepare for the hereafter.

The rest of the sermons were not asserted because the society could not conceive them as real value(s). For a period of about hundred years, no one gave significant pondering to the decree of Imam 'Ali to Malik Ashtar, which is full of social and political injunctions.[2](#)

There, 'Ali speaks of an utterance of the Prophet that "people cannot attain the degree of sanctity, and freedom from defect until they reach a position where the weak stand against the strong, and claim their right without stuttering". Fifty years ago the society could not understand this, because there was a society focused on single value, while 'Ali's words contain all human values as shown in his biography, and personality.

I do not intend to give the impression that our society at present is praiseworthy indefinitely, but, fortunately some worthy values have appeared in it. However, I am anxious that once more, in the course of life, they may become monolithic, and destroy other values by neglecting them. If we follow Imam 'Ali (as) as our model, a perfectly well balanced man, this should not happen. He is a man in whom all human values have developed harmoniously. At night, and during the communion with God, no Gnostic can rival him in his divine ecstasy, and his flight towards God. He was delved in his devotion that nothing could possibly divert his attention, and that divine love seemed to have taken him to another world. That is how he was in the altar (mosque, or, masjid) at night.

During the daytime, he was a different man. Unlike many ascetics, he was cheerful, attended his companions, and was found to be witty. Amr ibn Aas criticized him, and termed him as unsuitable for the Caliphate since he was so cheerful, as if a caliph must always look glum to apprehend people. In battle too he was cheerful, and smiling, while in the altar he was mournful.

The Holy Qur'an says:

***"Surely, the rising by night is the firmest way to tread and the most corrective of speech.. Surely, you have, in the day time, a long occupation."*(Sura al- Muzzamil, 73: 6-7).**

The night is for worship, and the day for living and mingling with society. The poet Hafiz is sometimes misperceived as malevolent on pretext of conspiring to mislead youth. It is said that this great poet was

addicted to wine, whereas in reality, his poems are wholly spiritual and mystical, and his wine is of a spiritual nature figuratively speaking. He was a religious man who was a commentator of the Holy Qur'an, and, later on, became famous as a poet. He has expressed the above Verse of the Holy Qur'an in a poem, saying that daytime is for work and effort, and night time for the wine (figuratively) of devotion.

'Ali is such a man, and has been recognized in this way for over a thousand years. The compiler of "Nahjul-Balagha", Syed Razi, says: "The amazing thing about this book is that you see 'Ali in so many different worlds as you read it, that is in the words of devotion, philosophy, mysticism, military affairs, court of justice, religious jurisprudence and so on, and he is never absent from any aspect of the human (earthly) world."

Safiyedin Hilli, a poet of the sixth century of the Hijrah, compliments 'Ali that he was a collection of all paradoxes, he was both a ruler, and a sage, docile and brave, poor and wealthy (knowledge), gentle and resolute, and a devotee and a common man. He was a hero in all human spheres, something that we cannot be, but we can at least maintain a certain degree of equilibrium among all values to be called a true Muslim in different walks of life.

[1.](#) Sura al-'Araf, 7: 179.

[2.](#) Nahjul Balagha, letter 53.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/perfect-man-murtadha-mutahhari/part-1-perfect-man#comment-0>