

Section Two: The Path to "Him"

In the previous section, we discussed the superiority and perfection of Islamic theology and afterwards we briefly discussed the methods of realizing God, which is the first stage in understanding Him. Now we shall examine the second stage, which involves identifying divine attributes and actions. We call this step "Understanding God" as opposed to "Realizing God".

We all know very well that each religion and ideology including Islam attributes certain characteristics to their God and ascribes certain actions to Him. As we have previously mentioned, the difference of opinion between various theists regarding the attributes and actions of God have resulted in contrasting theologies and diverse portrayals of their object of devotion. Indeed, the most significant method of understanding God is by understanding His attributes and actions. A more comprehensive and in-depth insight into these issues results in a more perfect theology. Therefore, it is morally and intellectually imperative that all believers increase the depth and caliber of their understanding of God through correct and penetrating studies of God's attributes.

All of us may have seen believers who do not have an accurate understanding of God's attributes and have sufficed themselves with superficial and fallacious knowledge. It may even be true that we too are such believers. We may have seen many people who albeit unwittingly tend toward "corporealization of God" [jism ingarī]. For example, they may visualize God as a great being who lives in the skies. Many of us are also affected by a kind of "anthropomorphism of God" [insānvār ingarī]; in other words, we regard God—at least with respect to some attributes—similar to humans, or we consider the source of divine acts as humanlike feelings and emotions!

We must also bear in mind that superficial or fallacious understanding of divine attributes and actions is not merely an intellectual problem without any effect on our daily lives; the truth is the complete opposite. Persons who believe in God and His power and sovereignty but do not correctly understand the boundlessness of His mercy and clemency may completely lose all hope in attaining paradise after committing a great sin and may regard themselves eternally damned and suffer from mental anguish throughout their lives because they believe that God will never forgive them. In addition, when faced with

apparently unsolvable problems in their lives, those who incorrectly understand the power and generosity of God easily give up and instead of practicing patience, perseverance, and trust in God, become debilitated and weak.

In short, the endeavors of believers to continually correct and perfect their theology is not simply a struggle to attain a worthy set of beliefs and knowledge; rather, these efforts have phenomenal, practical and sometimes decisive effects upon one's life. This is why Islam has a special regard for theological issues and has presented comprehensive teachings about divine attributes and acts. Throughout the centuries, the detailed teachings of Islam have presented mutakalimūn, philosophers, mystics and other Moslem thinkers with an invaluable legacy, which, through interpretation and development, has brought order to Islamic theology. In the following discussions, we shall attempt to illuminate briefly some of the most important Islamic theological beliefs.

Understanding the Nature of God and His Attributes

One of the basics of Islamic theology is recognition and differentiation between the nature of God and His attributes and actions. Understanding Divine Nature is not possible for any being other than God, including humanity. A short and clear proof of this claim is that the nature of God is illimitable and infinite while all other beings are limited and finite and, self-evidently, a limited being cannot understand the unlimited nature of God.^{[1](#)}

The intellect can understand the depth of His nature,

If a whirligig can reach the depth of the sea.^{[2](#)}

This fact can also be extracted from various Qur'anic verses such as this:

﴿يَعْلَمُ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ وَلَا يُحِيطُونَ بِهِ عِلْمًا﴾

“He knows that which they have before them, and that which they have left behind, while they do not comprehend Him in knowledge.”^{[3](#)}

According to a tradition, as an interpretation of this verse Imam ‘Alī (‘a) stated:

لَا يُحِيطُ الْخَلَائِقُ بِاللَّهِ عَزَّوَجَلَّ عِلْمًا.

“Creations cannot comprehend God in knowledge.”^{[4](#)}

The impossibility of understanding Divine Nature does not mean that we are deprived of any knowledge of God whatsoever; rather, humanity has been given access to a different sort of knowledge that comes through appreciation of divine attributes and actions. Therefore, humanity's desire for understanding their Lord is not out of proportion. On the contrary, comprehension of God—in the way we have explained—is not only possible but also ideal. Divine prophets have also endeavored to familiarize

humans with divine attributes and reveal unto them their mistakes and obstacles in the path of understanding God.

The Holy Qur'an has mentioned the attributes of God in many verses. For example, regard the following verse:

“He is Allah besides Whom there is no god. He is the King, the All-holy, the All-salutary, the Granter of security, the Guardian over all, the Almighty, the All-dominating, the All-sublime. Allah is pure of those they associate with Him. He is Allah the Creator, the Maker, the Shaper. To Him belong the Names [and attributes] Most Beautiful [asmā’ ul-husnā]. All that is in the Heavens and earth glorify Him. He is the Almighty, the All-wise.”⁵

The Methods of Understanding God

Many methods of understanding the attributes and acts of God have been placed before humankind.

The following are the most important methods of understanding God:

1. Intellect

Just as the human intellect is useful in proving the existence of God, so also can it be useful in understanding God's attributes. Initially, through the illuminations of their minds, humans concisely realize that God must contain all attributes of perfection; meaning that God possesses all qualities—in an absolute manner without any defects or faults—that in any way express the perfection of their modified noun.

Subsequently, through in-depth analysis of those attributes of God that are revealed in the course of proving His existence, one may attain comprehensive understanding of other divine attributes and their respective definitions and characteristics. For example, through intellectual reasoning regarding the existence of God, we proved His existence as a necessary being and thus by contemplating the meaning of the necessity of existence, we realize that God is not compound [murakkab] and is indivisible or monad [basit]. This is because any compound requires the existence of its constituents and having need of something else to exist is incompatible with necessity of being. Thus, the intellect proves the attribute of indivisibility of God.

2. Nature

As we shall elucidate later in the discussion of divine Unity, at least several stages of belief in monotheism are amalgamated in the nature of humanity. In other words, the human nature regards God as One and Unique and does not tolerate polytheism. As a result, humans can realize and understand several of God's attributes—such as Unity—through their nature.

3. Investigation of the Natural World

Another means of understanding God is contemplation about the state and characteristics of the world around us. For example, considering the general order of existence and the finality [hadafmand / ghayatmand] of natural phenomena reveals the attributes of God's omniscience and divine wisdom.

4. Mystical Revelation

Mystical revelation is also a method of understanding God. Through spiritual and mystical perfection, humans can attain such rank that they can spiritually perceive the beauty and majesty of God and observe the manifestations of His perfect attributes.

5. Referral to the Qur'an and Traditions

Yet another method of understanding the attributes and actions of God is studying Qur'anic verses and the teachings of the leaders of Islam. The perpetually flowing and inspiring fountainhead that is the Qur'an and Traditions of the Immaculates presents us with profound and extensive teachings concerning theology—teachings that the intellect cannot possibly unravel by itself or that can be comprehend only with great difficulty.⁶

Understanding Divine Attributes

The intellect and divine revelation both agree that God possesses all attributes of perfection; God is Omniscient, Omnipotent, Benevolent, Living, Creator, Benefactor, and, in addition to these attributes, many other qualities can be accredited to Him. On the other hand, many of God's attributes—such as knowledge, power, and life—are used in common with both God and His creations. Are the meanings of each of these attributes identical in both usages? Or, does each usage have a different meaning? For example, does the word “knowledgeable” have the same meaning in these two statements: “God is knowledgeable” and “Humans are knowledgeable”? There are three main perspectives concerning these questions:

The First Perspective

Some believe that not only is the meaning different in each of these usages, in fact humankind cannot fully understand the meaning of divine attributes. They believe that we may only accept and have faith in the existence of the attributes of God that are expressed in the Qur'an and Traditions but we cannot understand the full truth of these attributes.

The main grounds they offer for their belief is that humans perceive the meaning of attributes such as knowledge, power, and will through perceptions of our surroundings internal to ourselves, whereas associating these perceptions with God is not proper because God is in no way similar to His creations.

He is an absolute and necessary being, while all other beings are contingent, limited, and imperfect. Therefore, we have no right to generalize our own attributes to God and because we do not have access to worthier concepts—and those concepts we do possess are based upon contingent beings—we have no choice but to remain silent regarding divine attributes and content ourselves with that which is discussed in the Qur'an and Traditions.

The Second Perspective

This group believes that there is no significant difference between the meanings of divine attributes and the attributes of created things and those attributes that are ascribed to both God and His creations have a somewhat similar meaning.

The Third Perspective

Alongside the aforementioned views, there is a third perspective that is more compatible with the general ambience of the Qur'an and Traditions. According to this view, even though there is a difference between the definitions of God's attributes and those of His creations, this does not mean that God's attributes are unfathomable. By taking inspiration from Qur'anic and Traditional concepts, the advocates of this perspective endeavor to offer an analysis of divine attributes that preserves the purity and sublimity of God in respect to the faults and limits of His creations while confirming the comprehensibility of His attributes. Following is a concise example of such an analysis:

First, we must contemplate the essence of an attribute of perfection when used in respect to ourselves and the beings around us, and identify all the conditions that in some way limit this attribute. Next, we must distill the attribute of these limiting conditions. In other words, we must prune and isolate the essential meaning of the attribute from all limiting factors. Thus we reach a concept that is worthy of God since it describes a sort of existential perfection and is abstracted from all faults and deficiencies.

For instance, through our internal perception and contemplation of external objects, we arrive at an understanding of "knowledge" which is a type of awareness. However, this awareness is limited by several factors: it is temporal because at first it does not exist and later comes into existence. It is also affected by deterioration and forgetfulness. Additionally, in order to gain knowledge—in many cases—tools and instruments are needed. Also, in gaining knowledge there is a possibility of error. These factors—temporality, possibility of deterioration and errors, and necessity of instruments—are such that they cause limits or faults in our knowledge and awareness. Therefore, when using this attribute regarding God, we must abstract it of all these factors while preserving its essential meaning—awareness. Thus we arrive at a description of a knowledge that is past and future eternal (non-temporal), infallible, and needless of instruments. Such a description makes the Knowledge of God understandable and at the same time compatible with the Holiness and Sublimity of God.

Purity and Understandability of Divine Attributes in the Qur'an

As we have previously mentioned, this third perspective is more compatible with the Qur'an and Traditions. The Qur'an has mentioned God's attributes in hundreds of verses and in some cases it has described and analyzed these attributes. The Qur'an continually invites us to contemplate upon its verses.⁷ How can one contemplate a verse containing God's attributes without understanding those attributes? Can one truly accept that our duty is merely to read Qur'anic verses without understanding? Hence, continual reference to the attributes of God in the Qur'an proves the fallaciousness of the first perspective. Additionally, the Qur'an regards "worship" and "servitude" toward God as the ultimate purpose of our creation:

﴿وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ﴾

"And I have not created the jinn and humankind but that they worship Me." ⁸

It also obvious that worship of a being whose essence and attributes are completely unknown is meaningless and futile. From a logical standpoint, neither communicative relations nor spiritual proximity is possible with an unintelligible being. As an example, if we do not believe in the unlimited power, authority and ability of a being to act how can we beseech help from and have faith in that being?

Additionally, many verses in the Qur'an emphasize the sublimity and purity of God high above the attributes of His creations. God does not tolerate the assimilative descriptions some humans associate with Him. For example, after mentioning the unworthy beliefs of polytheists about God, the Qur'an regards their descriptions as unfitting of the status of Divine Holiness:

﴿وَجَعَلُوا لِلَّهِ شُرَكَاءَ الْجِنَّ وَخَلَقَهُمْ وَخَرَقُوا لَهُ بَنِينَ وَبَنَاتٍ بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ، سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى عَمَّا يُصِفُونَ﴾

"And they ascribe the jinn as associates to Allah, though He has created them. And without any knowledge, they impute to Him sons and daughters. He is pure of and highly exalted above what they describe." ⁹

The purity the Qur'an describes, which both disagrees with the incomprehensibility of divine attributes and comparison of God with His creations, has been affirmed in several Traditions. Imam 'Alī (a) has stated:

لَمْ يُطْلِعِ الْعُقُولَ عَلَى تَحْدِيدِ صِفَتِهِ وَ لَمْ يَحْجِبْهَا عَنْ وَاجِبِ مَعْرِفَتِهِ.

"He has not informed the intellect of the limits of His attributes; however He has not made it blind to necessary knowledge of Himself." ¹⁰

Thus, it can be said that improving one's understanding of God can only come about through understanding His attributes. Therefore, we shall endeavor to elucidate concisely several of the most important divine attributes. According to Islamic belief, one of the most important divine attributes is Divine Unity. Because of the importance of Divine Unity [tawhīd], we will start our succinct discussion regarding divine attributes with Unity.

1. Unity

Islam is a monotheist religion. The importance of Unity is such that, along with acceptance of the prophethood of Muhammad (S), it is the first condition for entering the life-giving religion of Islam and eternal salvation and bliss. Knowing that God is Unique and worshiping none but Him not only has a fundamental part in Islamic beliefs, it also has a key role in other areas of Islamic teachings, such as ethics [akhlāq] and Islamic jurisprudence [fiqh]. The essence of the Islamic moral system is based upon Divine Unity and many Islamic laws and rites originate from the monotheistic essence of Islam. Belief in Divine Unity reshapes the lives of humans—in both intellectual and ideological areas, and in deed and action—and colors our whole existence.

In short, Divine Unity is the root of the tree of Islam, and ideological, moral, and applied teachings are its branches, leaves, and fruit.

The doctrine of Divine Unity is not limited to Islam. In fact, all divine prophets enjoined humans to monotheism and all divine religions were monotheistic:

﴿وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ مِنْ رَسُولٍ إِلَّا نُوحِي إِلَيْهِ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنَا فَاعْبُدُونِ﴾

“And before thee, we have never sent a messenger but that we revealed unto him, saying: ‘There is no Allah but I, so serve Me.’”¹¹

In perpetuation of the call of previous prophets, the Holy Qur'an pays special attention to the principle of Divine Unity. The maxim of monotheism has been repeated many times in different forms throughout the Qur'an, including statements such as, “There is no god but Allah¹²”, “There is no god but He¹³”, and “There is no god but I¹⁴”. Also by divine decree, the messenger of Islam (S) declares that the epitome of his message (risālah) is enjoining people to monotheism:

﴿قُلْ إِنَّمَا أُمِرْتُ أَنْ أَعْبُدَ اللَّهَ وَ لَا أُشْرِكَ بِهِ، إِلَيْهِ أَدْعُوا وَإِلَيْهِ مَأْبُ﴾

“Say: ‘I have been commanded to serve Allah and to associate naught with Him. To Him I invite [you], and to Him I return.’”¹⁵

Theoretical and Applied Monotheism

Monotheism is divided into two major branches: theoretical and applied. Theoretical monotheism is unconditional belief in the Unity of God in essence, attributes, and acts. When this belief becomes fused into the heart and soul, a person's actions and endeavors gain a certain tenor and their deeds become monotheistic. Thus, applied monotheism is the condition where a person's monotheistic beliefs control his actions so that he acts in accordance with his monotheistic thought. [16](#)

Theoretical monotheism is categorized into three groups: unity of divine essence [tawhīd al-ʿaṣṣat], unity of divine attributes [tawhīd al-sifāt], and unity of divine acts [tawhīd al-afʿāl]. Applied monotheism is also divided into several groups. [17](#)

2. Divine Knowledge

According to Islamic doctrine, God is knowledgeable of all creation and is aware of everything. As we have stated earlier, "knowledge" has a specific meaning which each of us experiences within ourselves. Nonetheless, in order to ascribe this definition to God we must strip it of all of the philosophical limits and conditions that are unbefitting of the divine status of God. Thus, we may define the knowledge of God as such: Divine knowledge is absolute, limitless, past and future eternal, infallible; it needs no instruments, preparation, or intermediates; and does not require external influence on the Divine Essence.

The most important fact regarding God's knowledge is the issue of the boundlessness of His awareness. God is absolutely knowledgeable of His Essence and is aware of all of His creations, both before and after their creation.

God's Prior Knowledge and Humanity's Free Will

The knowledge of God is boundless and infinite and includes all incidents throughout the past, present and future. Thus, from the beginning of time, God has been aware of everything throughout eternity. This includes knowledge of what people will do and refrain from doing in the future. From long ago, God's awareness of the future of all people has been regarded by some as a negation of our free will. They have the misunderstanding that God's prior knowledge of our future deeds is incompatible with free will. This dispute and its resolution will be explored in the discussion entitled Compulsion [jabr] or Free Will [ikhtiyār].

The Perspective of Qur'an and Traditions regarding Divine Knowledge

Many Qur'anic verses speak of the knowledge and awareness of God. The conjugates of the infinitive 'ilm (knowledge), such as 'alima (he knew) and ya'lamu (he knows), and the qualifier 'alīm (very knowledgeable/omniscient) and its various offshoots such as samī' (able to hear/all-hearing) and basīr (able to see/all-seeing) are used many times to describe God. Additionally, in several verses there are more specific qualities of knowledge attributed to God such as 'alim ul-ghaḥb (Knower of the Invisible)

and ‘allāṁ ul-ghuyūb (Knower of All Things Hidden). Because of the vast number of these verses, we will suffice with the explanation of two key points:

Proof of the Knowledge of God

It seems that the Holy Qur’an considers God’s knowledge and awareness needless of proof. Even so, the following interpretation in various verses indicates a sort of rationale regarding God’s omniscience:

﴿أَلَا يَعْلَمُ مَنْ خَلَقَ وَهُوَ اللَّطِيفُ الْخَبِيرُ﴾

“Does not He who created know, while He is the All-exact (Knower of subtleties), the All-aware?”¹⁸

By rhetorical questioning¹⁹, this verse asks if it is possible that God, who is the Creator, not be knowledgeable while the act of creation necessitates knowledge of all conditions and qualities of the creature. Thus according to the Holy Qur’an, there is a correlation between the act of creation and knowledge of the creature. Accordingly, one who considers God the Creator of all beings cannot refute His infinite knowledge of all the intricacies of Creation.

The Absolute and Infinite Knowledge of God

While describing God as knowledgeable and aware, the Holy Qur’an emphasizes the boundlessness of His knowledge. A reason for this emphasis may be that in addition to revealing a fundamental fact regarding divine attributes and perfecting and augmenting our theology and understanding of God, the principle of God’s infinite knowledge has valuable ethical and spiritual effects. Faith in the infinite knowledge of God and His awareness of all things has a profound role in fortifying our trust in God and stimulates us to engage in sincere worship of God. Furthermore, belief in the fact that God is aware of the public and private deeds of all people, including their motives and intents, has a positive effect upon our abstinence from sin and wrongdoing. In various places, the Qur’an explicitly declares the boundlessness of Divine Knowledge:

﴿وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ﴾

“And Allah is knowledgeable of all things.”²⁰

Moreover, in other instances, it elucidates various aspects of divine knowledge and thus puts emphasizes on its comprehensiveness:

“He knows what penetrates into the earth, and what comes forth from it, and what descends from the heavens and what ascends into it. He is with you no matter where you are; and Allah sees all

you do.”[21](#)

The descriptions in this verse pertain to many things, and in sum, this verse depicts the various aspects of God’s awareness of His creation. These descriptions include seeds, raindrops, tree roots, mines and treasures hidden within the earth, subterranean animals, seething springs, ascending and descending angels, clouds, birds, comets, and inestimable other things.

Yet other verses speak of God’s knowledge of the secrets hidden within the hearts:

﴿قُلْ إِنْ تُخْفُوا مَا فِي صُدُورِكُمْ أَوْ تُبْدُوهُ يَعْلَمُهُ اللَّهُ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ﴾

“Say: ‘Whether you hide what is in your breasts or reveal it, Allah knows it and He also knows all that is in the heavens and the earth.’”[22](#)

The extensiveness and infiniteness of Divine Knowledge is also reflected in the teachings of Traditions (Hadith).

The Leader of the Faithful, ‘Alī (‘a), explains the broadness of Divine Knowledge as follows:

يَعْلَمُ عَجِيجَ الْوُحُوشِ فِي الْفَلَوَاتِ وَمَعَاصِيَ الْعِبَادِ فِي الْخَلَوَاتِ وَاخْتِلَافَ النَّيَّانِ فِي الْبِحَارِ الْغَامِرَاتِ وَتَلَاطُمَ الْمَاءِ بِالرِّيَّاحِ الْعَاصِفَاتِ.

“God is aware of the cries of wild animals in the mountains and deserts, and the private transgressions of His servants, and the movements of fish in deep seas, and also the formation of turbulence and waves by strong winds.”[23](#)

Additionally, it has been quoted about Imam ʿAlī (‘a) that in response to one of his disciples who said, “I thank God to the extent of His knowledge[24](#)”, he replied, “Do not say that because there is no extent to His knowledge.”[25](#)

3. Divine Power

Another of God’s attributes is power (omnipotence). Power is also one of the attributes that humans possess in a limited and deficient manner. Consequently, the meaning of power and impotence are, to a large extent, clear to us. Even so, we must bear in mind that at times the word power is used in religious teachings with a different meaning intended. For instance, in physics and the natural sciences, power may be used synonymously with energy or force. For better understanding of the difference of meanings and avoiding confusion, it can be said that in this discussion, ‘powerful beings’ are beings that can perform an act if they will to do so and can refrain from performing it if they do not will to do so.

In other words, we can only say that one has the power to perform a certain act if performing the act or

refraining from performing it depends on his own explicit volition and will. Therefore, the meaning of the statement “Jane has the power to write” is that if Jane wants to write, she may and if she does not want to, she may refrain from writing. Accordingly, omnipotence means that if God wills an act, He can carry it out, and if He wills not, He can refrain from performing the act.

Naturally, as previously mentioned, here too we must contemplate what we regard as “power” in the creatures of God, identify all limiting factors, and proclaim omnipotence to be pure of these limits. For example, when we scrutinize the truth of our power, we find that performing or foregoing an action is usually a function of external influences. Obviously, this is not true with reference to God because it necessitates that God be influenced by others and be controlled by something other than Himself, while this is contrary to the necessity of being and self-sufficiency of God.

Illimitability of God's Power and the Omnipotence Paradox

Is God's power unlimited, absolute, and all-encompassing? Alternatively, is His power finite with some things being outside His power? According to the majority of Islamic scholars, omnipotence, like all other divine attributes of perfection, is unlimited, boundless, and without restrictions. A range of Qur'anic verses also attest to this fact.

Throughout time, belief in the Absolute Power of God has met with various doubts and challenges. Here we shall explain and answer one of the most important challenges which is sometimes called the “omnipotence paradox”.

The omnipotence paradox has diverse forms, all of which are based upon a single foundation. The most complex form of this paradox is delineation of a question in which at first glance, both negative and positive answers result in direct repudiation of omnipotence. For instance, it may be asked: Is God able to create a stone that He cannot lift? Or, one may enquire: Can God create a being that He is not able to annihilate? Upon contemplation of these questions, it seems that both a positive and a negative answer will result in refutation of the absoluteness of God's power. We see that a positive answer to the first question signifies the possibility of the existence of a stone that God cannot lift and a negative answer to the same question would mean that God is powerless to create a specific stone!

Before presenting a solution to the omnipotence paradox, we must first explain types of “impossibilities” which are divided into three groups:

Essential Impossibility: That which is impossible per se with no other factor being involved. A contradiction is one of the most obvious forms of essential impossibility.

Accidental Impossibility: That which is not impossible per se, but whose occurrence necessitates realization of an essential impossibility. For example, the existence of an effect without a cause is an accidental impossibility because its realization necessitates a contradiction.^{[26](#)} Essential and accidental impossibilities are also called logical impossibilities.

Normal Impossibility: That the occurrence of which seems impossible with respect to known natural laws, but whose realization is neither essentially impossible nor necessitates an essential impossibility. Transformation of a wooden staff into a snake, curing the sick without medicine, and speech of inanimate beings are several examples of normal impossibilities.[27](#)

Bearing in mind the above explanations, God's power does not encompass essential and accidental impossibilities, and all questions that are asked within the omnipotence paradox regarding the power of God in performing various acts are accidental impossibilities. For example, if we thoroughly contemplate the true nature of creation—which is called causality in philosophy—we realize that the Creator—i.e. the existence-giving cause—transcends all aspects of the creature—i.e. the effect. More specifically, the existence and all qualities and characteristics of creatures are dependant upon their Creator. Thus, supposing a creature whose creator cannot alter or destroy, necessitates supposing a situation in which the “creator” simultaneously be and not be the creator which is clearly a contradiction. Accordingly, creation of a stone that the creator cannot lift or creation of a being that the creator cannot destroy is an accidental impossibility and as we have already stated, Divine Power does not encompass accidental impossibilities.

It could be stated thus that the result of the above analysis is nothing but the acceptance of the finitude of God's power, but it is essential to keep in mind that the exclusion of essential and accidental impossibilities from the realm of God's power is in no way a limiting factor for divine power because essentially these things are not capable of being originated and therefore are beyond the encompassment of any type of power. Consequently, it is stated that, in essence, the definition of shay' (thing) does not include logical impossibilities, and thus Qur'anic phrases such as “God is capable of all things” are not subject to these impossibilities.[28](#) In other words, the deficiency and limitation pertains to the “acceptant” not the “subject”.[29](#)

As a summary of our answer to the “omnipotence paradox”, we could state that these paradoxes are logical impossibilities and thus cannot be associated with power. However, this non-association is not a fundamental flaw of divine power; on the contrary, the limitation is embedded in the nature of these things.

It is significant to note that in Islamic Traditions, the answers to various forms of the omnipotence paradox are indicative of the same answer that we have proposed. According to a Hadith, in reply to someone who asked:

هَلْ يَقْدِرُ رَبُّكَ أَنْ يُدْخِلَ الدُّنْيَا فِي بَيْضَةٍ مِنْ غَيْرِ أَنْ تَصْغُرَ الدُّنْيَا وَتَكْبُرَ الْبَيْضَةُ؟

“Can your Lord place the world into an egg without shrinking the world or enlarging the egg?”

Imam 'Alī (‘a) replied:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى لَا يُنْسَبُ إِلَى الْعِجْزِ وَالَّذِي سَأَلْتَنِي لَا يَكُونُ

“Verily, God, the Blessed, the Sublime, cannot be attributed with weakness; rather, what you have asked me cannot come to pass.”³⁰

According to the answer of Imam ‘Alī (‘a), the objective of the question itself is an impossibility. However, he explains that this does not entail weakness and impotence in God; rather, it rises from the fact that the goal in question is logically impossible and thus, in essence, not capable of coming into being.

Divine Power in the Qur’an and Traditions

The Holy Qur’an emphasizes the power of God through repetition of qualities such as qādir (able) and qadīr (all-powerful), and thus it regards God as omnipotent. In addition, the phrase “God is capable of all things”³¹ and similar phrases have been used many times over in the Qur’an—all of which inform of the generality and illimitability of divine power.

In various Qur’anic verses, we encounter a type of reasoning regarding the boundlessness of God’s power. As an example, the Qur’an regards the creation of the heavens and earth as a sign of God’s ability to resurrect the dead:

“Have they not seen that Allah, who created the heavens and earth and has not been wearied by creating them, is able to resurrect the dead? Yes indeed, He is capable of all things.”³²

In addition, the generality of God’s power is emphasized in many Hadiths. According to one Hadith, Imam ‘aḍḍīq (‘a) declared:

مُحِيطٌ بِمَا خَلَقَ عِلْمًا وَقُدْرَةً... وَ الْأَشْيَاءُ لَهُ سِوَاءٌ عِلْمًا وَقُدْرَةً

“He is All-encompassing in knowledge and power with respect to His creations... All things are equal for Him in His knowledge and power.”³³

4. Divine Life

God is living. Like knowledge and power, this attribute can also be ascribed to both God and some of His creations. Through contemplation of the uses of this attribute, we realize that a living being is a being that possesses active volition and awareness.

Thus, in definition we can say: “Life is a type of existential perfection which manifests such that the creature possessing it engages in volitional actions, and has knowledge and awareness.” According to this definition, activity and awareness are signs of life, and lack of these qualities in an object shows that

object to be lifeless.

With regard to this explanation, the fact that God has life means that the Divine Essence possesses a specific perfection that affirms His knowledge and actions. Naturally, in order to uphold the holiness and sublimity of God, we must purify this attribute of all limits and restrictions perceived in the life of created things.

For instance, in natural creatures such as humans and animals, life is accompanied by growth, consumption of food, reproduction, and movement such that these things signify life in these creatures. However, we must not regard these qualities as necessary to life and we must not assume that life is absolutely linked with these qualities; rather, these qualities are only necessary in natural beings. In fact, divine life is pure of all limiting properties, which are not befitting of the divinity of God. Divine life is inherent, past eternal (azal^٤), future eternal (abad^٤), and immutable without it being associated with the necessities of natural life such as growth, consumption of food, etc.

Divine Life according to the Qur'an and Traditions

There are many Qur'anic verses wherein God is accredited with the quality of life:

﴿اللّٰهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْحَيُّ الْقَيُّومُ﴾

“He is Allah; there is no god but Him, the Living, the Everlasting.”³⁴

﴿هُوَ الْحَيُّ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَادْعُوهُ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ﴾

“He is the Living; there is no Allah but Him, so call upon Him purifying your religion for Him, wholeheartedly.”³⁵

The phrase, “هو الحيّ” (He is the Living)—according to Arabic grammar³⁶—indicates the exclusivity of life for God and holds that true life is unique to God. Bearing in mind the fact that inferior degrees of life exist in other beings and that essentially, the Qur'an introduces God as the life-giver of all beings,³⁷ it seems that the signification of this exclusiveness is that only divine life is inherent, and past and future eternal, while lives of all creatures are temporary and ‘on loan’ from God.

The inexhaustibility and eternality of divine life has been stressed in various Qur'anic verses:

﴿وَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى الْحَيِّ الَّذِي لَا يَمُوتُ﴾

“And put thy trust in the Ever-living who dies not.”³⁸

In various Hadiths, the truth of divine life and its differences with the lives of creations are enumerated. The following is a profound and precise Hadith from Imam Kāẓim (‘a):

وكان الله حيًّا بالحيَّةِ حادثَةٍ ولا يكونُ مُوصوفٍ ولا كيفٍ محدودٍ ولا أينَ موقُوفٍ ولا مكانَ ساكنٍ بل حيٌّ لِنَفْسِهِ

“And God is living but not a life that has come into being; His life does not have an [independent] existence with which to be qualified; it does not possess limitative conditions or a location in which to remain or a place in which to abide; rather, His life is inherent.”³⁹

This valuable Hadith reveals that in contrast to the lives of His creations, divine life has not come into being; on the contrary, in adherence with the past eternality of the Divine Essence, His life is also past eternal. Life is not accidental and separate from His essence; rather, it is one with His essence. Thus, in accordance with His essence, it is illimitable and boundless.

5. Past and Future Eternality

God is past and future eternal.⁴⁰ Most monotheists believe that God is a past eternal being, meaning that He has always existed and, in the past, there was no time in which He has not existed. Furthermore, God is future eternal—meaning that no time will come when He does not exist.

With regard to the opinions of Moslem scholars, there are evidently two perspectives in the interpretation of past and future eternity. According to the first exposition, God exists in all times; He has existed in the past, He exists now, and He will exist in the future. This explanation necessitates that God be a temporal being, restricted to the confines of time, and subject to the passage of time. In contrast, the second interpretation states past and future eternity. Basically, this means that the essence of God transcends the framework of time while being immanent throughout time and all temporal beings.⁴¹ According to this perspective, saying that God has always existed or will perpetually exist in the future, is a careless and negligent statement.

Even though the general meaning of past and future eternity is compatible with the first interpretation, it would appear that the second interpretation presents a more precise and in-depth perspective because the absoluteness of the Divine Essence signifies that His essence is not restricted to any limits or conditions—even time. To state this differently, time—with regard to the prevailing definition—is considered a quality of mobile and material creatures while the Divine Essence is pure of materiality and motion.

Accordingly, when speaking of the past and future eternity of God, we must bear in mind that the exact and acceptable meaning is that Divine Essence transcends time and that He surpasses all temporal beings. Naturally, we do not deny the fact that as long as we are restricted to the natural and physical world and have a temporal existence similar to all other natural creatures, it is difficult to imagine an

ultra-temporal entity—for whom the past, present, and future are the same.[42](#)

Past and Future Eternality of God in the Qur'an and Traditions

The terms “azal” (past eternal) and “abad” (future eternal) are not mentioned in the Holy Qur'an; the Qur'an has used other terms to indicate the past and future eternity of God. For example, the Qur'an introduces God as the “First” [awwal] and “Last” [akhir]:

﴿هُوَ الْأَوَّلُ وَالْآخِرُ وَالظَّاهِرُ وَالْبَاطِنُ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ﴾

“He is the First and the Last, and the manifest and invisible; and He is aware of all things.”[43](#)

Although exegetes have interpreted the two terms “awwal” and “akhir” dissimilarly, it appears that the meaning behind these terms equates to past and future eternity and this interpretation has been endorsed by several Traditions. In a sermon entitled “Apparitions” [Ashbah] Imam ‘Alī (‘a) states:

الاولُ الَّذِي لَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ قَبْلُ فَيَكُونُ شَيْءٌ قَبْلَهُ وَالْآخِرُ الَّذِي لَيْسَ لَهُ بَعْدُ فَيَكُونُ شَيْءٌ بَعْدَهُ.

“[God] is the First who has no before in order that there be something before Him, and He is the Last who has no after in order for there to be something after Him.”[44](#)

In another Hadith, Imam ‘Alī (‘a) has stated:

الاولُ لَاعَنَ اوَّلَ قَبْلِهِ وَلَا عَنَ بَدءٍ سَبَقَهُ وَالْآخِرُ لَا عَنَ نِهَائِهِ... لَمْ يَزَلْ وَلَا يَزُولُ بِلاَ بَدءٍ وَلَا نِهَائِهِ.

“He is the First without there being anything before Him or a beginning preceding Him, and He is the Last without having an end Himself... He has always been and always will be, without having a beginning or end.”[45](#)

These statements show that “First” and “Last” mean that with regard to God no before or after can be imagined, He has no beginning nor end, and nihility neither precedes nor follows Him.

Several Qur'anic verses also emphasize the eternity and indestructibility of God:

﴿كُلُّ شَيْءٍ هَالِكٌ إِلَّا وَجْهَهُ﴾

“All things perish except His Face.”[46](#)

Many exegetes believe the intent of “God’s Face” is the Divine Essence. Accordingly, this verse implies

the perpetuity and eternity of God.

6. Divine Wisdom

God is wise. Wisdom [hikmat] has several meanings and identifying them is necessary in order to understand this discourse better:

1. One definition of wisdom is “knowing and understanding the truth of objects”. With respect to the boundless knowledge of God, this definition is correct regarding God, the Exalted; however, it ultimately refers to the knowledge of God. In other words, according to this definition, wisdom is one of the branches of divine knowledge.
2. The second meaning of wisdom is that the acts of an agent are consistent and perfect to the extremity, and far from any faults. According to this definition also, God is wise; meaning that all His actions are realized in the most unimpeachable and perfect manner and are free of any defects or flaws.

As a concise reasoning for the wisdom of God—regarding this definition—we can declare that doubtless, there is a type of congruency and general resemblance between an agent and its action because an action is, in truth, a manifestation of the fundamental nature of the agent and a display of the perfections of its essence. Thus, the action of an agent whose essence is perfect in all aspects, must be perfect in all aspects. In definition of divine wisdom the Commander of the Faithful [Amīr al-Mu’minīn] (‘a) has made the following statements:

قَدَّرَ مَا خَلَقَ فَأَحْكَمَ تَقْدِيرَهُ.

“God measured all He created and then secured and stabilized creation.”⁴⁷

مُبْتَدِعِ الْخَلَائِقِ بِعِلْمِهِ وَ مُنْشِئِهِمْ بِحُكْمِهِ بِلَا اقْتِدَاءٍ لِاتَّعْلِيمٍ وَ لَا احْتِذَاءٍ لِمِثَالٍ صَانِعِ حَكِيمٍ.

“Through His knowledge He originates His creations and through His wisdom He creates them; without copying or learning from someone or utilizing a sample from a wise creator.”⁴⁸

An important result of divine wisdom—according to this definition—is deeming this world the best of all possible worlds, because the world, with all its immeasurable expanses, is an act of God and divine wisdom behooves that His actions be as perfect as possible.

3. The third definition of wisdom is eschewal of unrighteous and abhorrent actions. According to this definition, a wise being never commits indecent and evil acts. This definition is also true of God. According to Islamic belief, even though God is able to commit evil acts, His perfect and illimitable essence requires that He be solely a source of good acts. Belief in this type of divine wisdom entails

believing that God is pure of committing any act the general intellect of humankind deems evil.

By contemplating this definition, it becomes evident that justice is a branch of this type of wisdom; because, it means that God does not commit any evil act including lying, deceit, perfidy, or injustice.

4. The fourth definition of wisdom is that an agent performs actions according to rational ends and reasonable motives, and refrains from performing useless and futile acts. Therefore, this type of wisdom is the same as finality in deeds, meaning that God is pure of committing useless and purposeless acts and all His deeds are supported by rational intentions.

We humans also perform many of our actions with specific aims, but we must not overlook the fact that there is a fundamental difference between the finality of our deeds and the sagacity of divine acts. Through our volitional and meaningful actions, we generally endeavor to resolve one of our needs or deficiencies and by performing an action, we reach a level of perfection. Thus, the aim of our deeds is resolving needs and attaining perfection. For instance, persons who endeavor to gain knowledge by learning from a master or reading a book are in fact attempting to resolve their need of acquiring knowledge and replace ignorance with understanding to attain an ideal perfection. However, the purpose of divine acts is not attaining perfection. This is because God is absolute perfection and possesses no faults for which to attempt to compensate by carrying out various actions. In fact, the purpose of divine actions is guiding creations to an ideal perfection and the usefulness of these actions is resolving the needs of creatures.

The definition of divine wisdom under discussion is outlined in many Qur’anic verses. For example, regarding the finality of the creation of humans, it states:

﴿أَفَحَسِبْتُمْ أَنَّمَا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ عَبَثًا وَأَنَّكُمْ إِلَيْنَا لَا تُرْجَعُونَ﴾

“Did you [truly] think that We have created you in vain and that you would not be returned to Us?”⁴⁹

In this verse, the Qur’an regards the creation of humans as a divine act and states that this act is not futile; rather, it has a sagacious aim. The second part of this verse may be a subtle indication of this aim, meaning that God has created us in order that we utilize our facilities for attaining perfection and bliss and ultimately achieve the results of our actions in the next life.

In another verse, the Qur’an speaks of the sagacity of the creation of the heavens and earth and the creatures in between—which is probably an allusion to the creation of the universe:

﴿وَمَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا لَاعِبِينَ﴾

“And we have not created the heavens and earth and all that is between for sport.”⁵⁰

Also, according to a Hadith from Imam ʿaḍīdī (ʿa), in answer to someone who asked “Why has God created His servants?” he stated:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى لَمْ يَخْلُقْ خَلْقَهُ عَبَثًا وَ لَمْ يَتْرُكْهُمْ سُدىً... وَ مَا خَلَقَهُمْ لِيَجْلِبُ مِنْهُمْ مَنَفَعَةٌ وَ لَا لِيُدْفَعُ بِهِمْ مَضِرَّةٌ
بَلْ خَلَقَهُمْ لِيَنْفَعَهُمْ وَ يُوَصِّلَهُمْ إِلَى نَعِيمٍ أَبَدٍ.

“Verily, God, the Blessed, the Exalted, has not created His creatures in vain and has not forsaken them... and He has not created them for profit or to draw off harm through them; rather, He has created them to bring them profit and to adjoin them with eternal blessings.”⁵¹

Divine Wisdom and Evil

Up to this point, it has become clear that in Islamic thought all divine acts are sagacious and have rational purposes, and naturally these purposes pertain to His creations. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that in the world around us, there are affairs which we consider evil; all people are to some extent entangled in calamities and misfortunes caused by natural phenomena such as floods, earthquakes, epidemics, physical pains, mental illnesses, etc. which form an extensive share of evils. However, is the existence of various evils consistent with divine wisdom and the finality of Creation? If the purpose of the creation of humanity is securing their benefits, how can the existence of evil, which is contrary to human good and the purpose of humankind’s creation, be justified?

First, we must realize that the existence of calamities, misfortunes, pain, suffering, and hardships in the world is not void of rational purposes. In fact, these affairs aim to provide the true personal and general good of humanity. It is evident that presenting an in-depth exposition of the philosophy or wisdom behind the existence of evil would require a detailed discussion; however, here we shall concisely enumerate several advantages of the existence of evil in the personal and social lives of humankind.

a) Fulfillment of the Potential of Humanity

Humanity’s nature and the general circumstances of the natural world are such that much of our material and spiritual potential can only be realized through confrontation with hardships and struggling with problems. Just as the muscles of an athlete develop through exhausting and onerous exercise, so also some of humanity’s spiritual and mental abilities emerge only in order to overcome the difficulties of life when faced with trials and tribulations. For instance, many discoveries and scientific inventions have been made in response to the fundamental needs of humankind and in order to solve individual or collective problems.

The Qur’an emphasizes the fact that facility and ease is latent in every hardship and affliction:

﴿فَإِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا. إِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا﴾

“So [know that] truly with hardship there is ease. Yes, verily, with hardship comes ease.”⁵²

In addition, using beautiful analogies Imam ‘Alī (‘a) describes the effects of hardships in developing humanity’s hidden abilities:

أَلَا وَإِنَّ الشَّجَرَةَ الْبَرِّيَّةَ أَصْلَبُ عَوْدًا وَ الرِّوَاتِعَ الْخَضِرَةَ أَرْقُ جُلُودًا وَ النَّبَاتَاتِ الْبَدْوِيَّةَ أَقْوَى وَقَوًى وَ أَبْطَأَ خَمُودًا.

“Know that the branches of a tree that grows in the desert are tougher, [while] the membrane of pleasant grass is thinner, and the fires [made] of desert plants are more radiant and they burn longer.”⁵³

b) Divine Trials

One of the general traditions (sunnat) of God is *ibtīl* or trialing. Based on the purposes of our creation and existential characteristics, God tests us in the various contexts of our lives. Of course, it must be kept in mind that divine trials are not carried out by God with the purpose of discovering an unknown; on the contrary, the purpose of this divine act—trialing—refers to His creations—humanity, and the purpose is the development of our innate abilities and emergence of our inner treasures. Humanity, in the process of divine trials, is like an ore that is placed in a fiery furnace in order to separate its impurities and reveal its precious essence. Even so, sometimes divine trials are accomplished through ease and welfare.⁵⁴ Several Qur’anic verses indicate trialing humans through hardships and affliction, such as:

﴿وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِنَ الْخَوْفِ وَ الْجُوعِ وَ نَقْصٍ مِنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَ الْأَنْفُسِ وَ الثَّمَرَاتِ وَ بَشِّرِ الصَّابِرِينَ﴾

“And surely we shall try you with something of fear and hunger, and reduction of assets, lives, and produce; and give thou good tidings unto the patient.”⁵⁵

Regarding God’s purpose in testing His servants through hardships, Imam ‘Alī (‘a) declares:

*“As punishment of indecent behavior, God afflicts His servants with reduction of the fruits of trees, withholding rain, and closing off the cascade of blessings so that a repentant repents, and a sinner renounces his sins and a self-edifier becomes edified...”*⁵⁶

c) Awakening

One of the most important consequences of trials and tribulations is that they awaken humans from the slumber of negligence due to our immersion in worldly luxuries; they remind us of our important responsibilities regarding our Lord and transform our arrogance into humility and modesty. As an indication of this fact, the Holy Qur’an declares that the peoples of the prophets have always been confronted with difficulties so that they might renounce their disobedience and surrender to righteousness:

﴿وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا فِي قَرْيَةٍ مِّن نَّبِيٍّ إِلَّا أَخَذْنَا أَهْلَهَا بِالْبَأْسَاءِ وَالضَّرَّاءِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَضُرَّعُونَ﴾

“And We have sent no prophet to any city but that We burdened its people with hardship and affliction that haply they might weep [before Allah and be humble].”⁵⁷

In addition, the Qur'an states that the calamities and hardships afflicted upon Pharaoh's nation were admonitions to remind them of the truths they had neglected:

﴿وَلَقَدْ أَخَذْنَا آلَ فِرْعَوْنَ بِالسِّنِينَ وَنَقْصٍ مِنَ الثَّمَرَاتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَذْكُرُونَ﴾

“And verily, we afflicted the people of the Pharaoh with drought and diminution of produce that haply they might be edified.”⁵⁸

d) Appreciation of Divine Blessings

Another advantage of the existence of evils is that people realize the significance of divine blessings and are thankful for them because, “Only one who has been afflicted can appreciate health and ease”⁵⁹.

Imam ʿAlī ḥaqiq has stated:

إِنَّ هَذِهِ الْآفَاتِ وَإِنْ كَانَتْ تَنَالُ الصَّالِحِ وَالطَّالِحَ جَمِيعاً فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ جَعَلَ ذَلِكَ صَلاَحاً لِلصَّانِعَيْنِ كِلَيْهِمَا أَمَّا الصَّالِحُونَ فَإِنَّ الَّذِي يُصِيبُهُمْ مِنْ هَذَا يَرُدُّهُمْ نِعَمَ رَبِّهِمْ عِنْدَهُمْ فِي سَالِفِ أَيَّامِهِمْ فَيَحْدُوهُمْ ذَلِكَ عَلَى الشُّكْرِ وَالصَّبْرِ.

“While both the righteous and the wicked are plagued with these blights, God has instituted them as reformation for both. The blights and calamities which befall the righteous cause them to appreciate the past blessings of their Lord and this leads them to thankfulness and patience.”⁶⁰

So far, we have indicated several advantages and positive results of evil in the lives of humans. Here we shall discuss several general principles whose consideration will facilitate reaching the conclusions of this discourse.

1. Doubtless, the proportion of the knowledge of humanity before their ignorance is similar to the proportion of a raindrop before an endless ocean. Not only in the external world but also in the depths of our own beings there are still many untold secrets that we have yet to discover. Bearing in mind the limits of our knowledge, we cannot claim that we are aware of all the secrets and mysteries of what we call evil. Evils may have many advantages that we do not understand and evidently, not finding something is not a sure sign that it does not exist. Accordingly, wisdom dictates that we be more careful in our judgments because it is possible that what we deem evil is in fact good. The Qur'an reveals this truth beautifully by saying:

﴿وَعَسَى أَنْ تَكْرَهُوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَكُمْ﴾

“And much it happens that you abhor something which is best for you.”⁶¹

While rendering this enameled circle full of patterns,

No one knows what He did in the revolution of the compass.⁶²

2. The ultimate purpose of the creation of humanity is not that we occupy ourselves with indolence and leisure; rather, our main and ultimate purpose is attaining true bliss, which is not possible except through worship of God and achieving divine proximity. Therefore, one must not deem anything that is in conflict with one’s welfare and ease, contrary to wisdom and the purpose of creation because our eternal bliss and salvation habitually depends on enduring hardships and harshness. Therefore, consideration of the true purpose of the creation of humanity is a fundamental factor in analyzing the relationship of evils with divine wisdom. Consideration of this purpose results in a more comprehensive and realistic picture of reality.

3. Another important point that must not be neglected is the influence of the actions of people themselves in originating various evils. Humans are volitive creatures, and according to the law of causality, some of their volitional actions resulting from incorrect choices may cause or intensify various calamities and tragedies. Consequently, sometimes people bring about evil for themselves and others; however, due to unawareness of the relationship between their own actions and the results, they use the results of their actions as an excuse to challenge divine wisdom. Alas, “A self-inflictor cannot complain”.⁶³

The Qur’an also warns of the effects of human actions in creating unpleasant incidents:

﴿ظَهَرَ الْفَسَادُ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ أَيْدِي النَّاسِ﴾

“Corruption has appeared in land and sea for that which humans have done by their own hands.”⁶⁴

4. A final point is that it may be that not all the advantages of the existence of evils can be found in every evil. However, despite the fact that this may be due to our lack of understanding, it does not harm our claim because, even if one advantage can be found for each unpleasant phenomenon, the challenge of incompatibility of evil and divine wisdom would become void.

7. Divine Justice

The justness of God is one of the important pillars of Islamic theology and is also one of God’s attributes. Because of its unique prominence and importance, divine justice has a special position in Islamic belief.

This importance is so great that divine justice is regarded as one of the five main tenets of Shi'ism. Justice is intricately related to the genetic [takwān] order of existence and divine legislation. The acceptance or negation of divine justice results in a fundamental difference in one's ideology. Furthermore, belief in the justness of God is one of the bases of proving the resurrection, and recompense and retribution in the afterlife. Additionally, belief in the justice of God strengthens humanity's resolve to establish a just social system and confront manifestations of evil and oppression.

The Definition of Justice

Justice has been defined in many ways including "observance of equality and avoidance of discrimination" or "observing the rights of others". However, sometimes justice has a more general meaning that is inclusive of these definitions: "placing people and objects in suitable positions". This definition can be extracted from the following Hadith of Imam 'Alī ('a):

العدل يَضَعُ الامورَ مواضعها.

"Justice sets everything in its place".⁶⁵

The basis of this statement is that everything in the world has a proper station and justice is the observance of this proportion and the positioning of everything in its appropriate place.

Therefore, divine justice is such that God deals with all of His creations as they merit, sets them in their worthy station, and provides them as they deserve.

General Categorization of Divine Justice

To explain the range of divine justice and facilitate understanding of this discourse, we shall divide divine justice into three main branches:

1. Genetic Justice [‘adl al-takwān]

God blesses every being with favors according to its eligibility and does not waste any talents or abilities. In other words, the genetic justice of God requires that He impart upon each of His creations to the extent of their capacities and bestow perfections upon them according to their abilities and aptitude.

2. Legislative Justice [‘adl al-tashrī‘]:

God does not neglect ordaining laws and duties that are essential to the eternal bliss of humankind. Additionally, He does not give any person an obligation beyond their abilities and tolerance. Thus, divine legislation is just in relation to both these facts.

3. Compensational Justice [‘adl al-jaza’i]

God ordains the recompense of each person in proportion with his or her deeds. Thus, God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. The compensational justice of God requires that no one be penalized for a duty that was not imparted. Some divine rewards and punishments are realized in this world and the rest are realized in the afterworld.⁶⁶

Divine Justice in the Holy Qur’an

The Qur’an indicates divine justice through negation of cruelty and oppression; God does not oppress any person:

﴿إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَظْلِمُ النَّاسَ شَيْئًا وَلَكِنَّ النَّاسَ أَنْفُسَهُمْ يَظْلِمُونَ﴾

“Surely, Allah in no way wrongs people; yet humans wrong themselves.”⁶⁷

At times, the Qur’an speaks of Justice in a more general manner:

﴿وَمَا اللَّهُ يُرِيدُ ظُلْمًا لِّلْعَالَمِينَ﴾

“And Allah wishes no wrong upon the inhabitants of the world.”⁶⁸

Also, some Qur’anic verses speak of the legislative justice of God:

﴿وَلَا نُكَلِّفُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا وَلَدِينَا كِتَابٌ يَنْطِقُ بِالْحَقِّ، وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ﴾

“And We charge not any soul, save to its capacity and with Us is a Book speaking truth; and they shall not be wronged.”⁶⁹

And some verses testify to the compensational justice of God:

﴿وَنَضَعُ الْمَوَازِينَ الْقِسْطَ لِيَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ فَلَا تُظْلَمُ نَفْسٌ شَيْئًا﴾

“And we shall set up the scales of justice for the Day of Judgment so that no soul will be wronged in any way.”⁷⁰

﴿وَمَا كُنَّا مُعَذِّبِينَ حَتَّى نَبْعَثَ رَسُولًا﴾

“And We shall not chastise before We send forth a messenger.”⁷¹

Several Questions and Answers regarding Theodicy

Several Questions and Answers regarding Theodicy⁷²

Various questions have been proposed regarding divine justice and reaching rational answers to these may fortify one's belief in the justness of God. Here, we shall elucidate several of the major questions and answers:

a) Difference or Discrimination?

Is the existence of differences between beings compatible with divine justice? Why has God created some as humans and others as plants or animals? Moreover, why has He deprived plants, animals, and inanimate beings of the blessing of being human? Why are some people sighted and others blind? Why are some beautiful and others ugly? Why are some intelligent and others obtuse? Are these differences not types of discriminations or unjustness regarding some of God's creatures?

In order to arrive at a succinct answer to these questions one must study the world of creation and its characteristics. As a result of such study, it is easily realized that there are unalterable laws and perfect order governing the world that cannot be dissociated from it. To state matters differently, a world cannot exist with different general laws just as there cannot be non-sweet sugar or non-liquid water. On the other hand, we observe that incommutable laws require differences between entities. For instance, let us consider the general law of causality: according to this law, every effect is deficient when compared with its cause; in other words, cause and effect are necessarily dissimilar regarding their existential perfections and the existence of an effect that is completely similar to its cause or more perfect than its cause is not possible. Additionally, the principle of consistency and congruency between cause and effect requires that if the cause of emergence of a plant or birth of a malformed child comes to pass, the effect corresponding to the cause must surely come about (i.e. the plant or malformed child). Moreover, one must not expect for instance, that a human being emerge from a seed planted in the earth or that the cause of a malformed child result in a healthy child.

In short, the existence of various types of differences—typical, racial, individual, characteristic, etc.—between the creations of God is an inseparable condition of laws that cannot be altered or removed from the world. In addition, as we have stated about the second definition of divine wisdom, this world—with all its characteristics and laws—is the best of all possible worlds.

It is clear from the discussion that genetic [takwīnī] dissimilarities between creations are in no way discriminations. Discrimination occurs when two objects have an equal capacity to receive benefit, but this benefit is only bestowed upon one of the two; however, the fact that some beings do not receive various perfections is due to the laws governing existence; basically, they do not have the capacity to

attain such perfections. To state the matter differently, God is infinitely gracious, but the capacity and abilities of His creatures are limited. This restriction is an impartible quality of the world.

Consequently, divine justice tolerates the genetic [takwīnī] differences of creatures because these differences do not result in evil or discrimination.

b) Death and Nonexistence

Another question regarding divine justice involves death: Why must we become nonexistent and deprived of life after tasting the pleasures of life and longing for immortality? Is this situation consistent with God's justice?

In short, we can answer: Death is an inextricable requirement of life in the natural world and a being that prospers in nature cannot stay in it indefinitely. That is to say, the term "perpetuity in nature" is self-contradictory. In addition, death is not the end of our existence; rather, it is a transition from one world to the next. Death is the end of a part of our lives and the start of another. Therefore, there is no unjust aspect to death.

c) Commensurability of Sins with Retribution

The previous questions concern the genetic justice [‘adl al-takwīnī] of God; however, this question relates to His compensational justice. The basis of this question is that rationally, the commensurability between a crime and its punishment must be observed. Accordingly, it is not fair for instance that a person who has committed a driving infraction be treated in the same way as a murderer. However, God has ordained heavy punishments in the afterlife for various sins. For example, according to the Qur’an, the punishment of a person who intentionally kills a believer is eternal damnation. Here it can be asked: Are punishments in the afterlife—that are not consistent with the sins and transgressions of God's servants either temporally or qualitatively—compatible with divine justice?

The answer to this question requires contemplation of the nature of punishments in the afterlife. The truth is that afterworld retribution is fundamentally different from the conventional punishments in this world. The quality and quantity of conventional punishments are determined by legislations and conventions; this is why various juridical systems assign differing punishments for identical crimes. For instance, in one juridical system, the punishment of murder may be execution, while another juridical system may at most sentence a murderer to life imprisonment. However, afterworld retribution is not a conventional affair. It is the genetic [takwīnī] and necessary result of the deeds of criminals. More precisely, it is the manifestation of the true nature of sins—the embodiment of one's deeds. Therefore, speaking of incommensurability or unjust severity is irrelevant. Accordingly, in the same manner that the apparently simple and quick act of drinking poison has serious and long term consequences,—such as long-term illness or eternal deprivation of worldly life—in addition to their negative worldly consequences, our sins have inescapable results that will manifest in the afterlife. More accurately, the

truths regarding sins are revealed in the next world, which is the place of manifestation of truths and expulsion of veils.

d) Divine Justice and Human Suffering

Another question about divine justice is concerned with the pain and suffering of humans. Is the pain and suffering that result from calamities, hardships, illnesses, etc. congruous with God's justice?

In order to answer this question concisely, we will first divide the pain and suffering of humanity into two groups:

1. Some suffering and hardships rise from wicked deeds and are the inevitable result of our own mistakes. Due to the sagacious purpose of our genesis, humankind has been created with volition. People make mistakes through misuse of their free will and thus they become trapped within the consequences. It is evident that this sort of pain and suffering that is a product of our own deeds, in no way contradicts divine justice. As we have stated in the discussion on wisdom, the Qur'an also regards many of humanity's problems as the fruit of their own deeds.
2. Some of humankind's tribulations are not the results of their own deeds and are not worldly retributions for their sins, such as the suffering of innocent children or the atrocities that befall innocents on account of wars imposed by others. We Muslims believe that divine justice requires that reparations be made for these sufferings in some way—whether in this world or the next. In other words, in this world or in the afterlife, God will bestow upon those who were afflicted blessings greater than their suffering and in this way, He will more than compensate for humanity's misery and adversity. Thus, it is clear that humankind's worldly suffering does not damage the countenance of divine justice.

Apophatic Attributes [sifat al-salbi]

Thus far, we have reviewed the cataphatic attributes [sifat al-thubūti] of God. Now it is time to consider God's apophatic attributes. In order to keep this discussion short, we must inevitably suffice with several of the more important attributes.

1. Negation of Corporeality

One of the most important apophatic attributes of God is His incorporeality. The Divine Essence is pure of being material and corporeal. This is because all of corporeality possesses dimensions such as length, breadth, and height and thus they have a combination of qualitative components. Consequently, all corporeal creatures are compound, whereas in the discussion of divine unity we explained that God is monad and indivisible and that basically it is not possible for the Divine Essence to be compound. As a result, the corporeality of God is impossible.

2. Transcendence of Space and Direction

God cannot be situated in a specific position and is not a spatial entity occupying space or location. A more evident reason for this claim is that occupying space and being placed in a certain locality are material qualities, whereas God is immaterial. The Holy Qur'an indicates this apophatic attribute in this manner:

﴿وَلِلَّهِ الْمَشْرِقُ وَالْمَغْرِبُ، فَأَيْنَمَا تُولَّوْا فَثَمَّ وَجْهُ اللَّهِ﴾

“And to Allah belong the east and west; whithersoever you turn is facing Allah.”⁷³

It seems that the purport of east and west in this verse are not the two popular geographical directions; instead, this phrase is an allusion to all directions and the phrase “whithersoever you turn is facing God” indicates that God is present in all places and directions. The Divine Essence is not compound and has no components; therefore, His presence in all places cannot mean that He occupies all space and directions because material and sensorial occupation of direction and space requires that He be compound. Thus, His being everywhere means that He transcends direction and space.

The purport of this verse also suggests the negation of God's materiality: Since two objects cannot occupy the same space, the presence of God throughout the material and corporeal world, which is full of a variety of objects, is true only if God is an immaterial entity.

3. Negation of Incarnation

God cannot be embodied in any physical form. Therefore, according to Islamic belief, all perspectives that regard God as a type of incarnation in natural beings or as various humans are invalid and untrue. A short reasoning for the verity of this apophatic attribute for God is that—bearing in mind the reasoning for divine Unity—the incarnation of God in others requires that the Divine Essence become restricted and it necessitates His need of the assumed space. However, God has an illimitable existence, He is All-sufficient, and no need can be conceived for Him.

4. Negation of Unity with Others

God does not unite with other beings. A reason for this claim is that if the figurative sense of unity is intended—signifying combination of two objects or alteration of an object's form—this requires reaction, transformation, and the state of being compound whereas the Sacred Divine Essence is pure of these affairs because these conditions necessitate imperfection and need. However, if the true meaning of unity is intended—meaning synthesis of two essences to form a single essence—this is impossible not only for God but for any two beings.

19. – Rhetorical questioning is a sort of questioning in which the speaker propounds a question in such a way that its

answer is in the negative.

20. – Sūrah Baqarah 2:282.

21. – Sūrah Ḥadīd 57:4.

22. – Sūrah ‘Imrān 3:29.

23. – Nahj ul-Balaghah, sermon 198.

24. – “لِحَمْدِهِ مُنْتَهَى عِلْمِهِ” This statement presupposes that there is an extent or boundry for God’s Knowledge whereas in fact there is no limit to His Knowledge [editor].

25. – “لَا تَقُلْ ذَلِكَ فَإِنَّهُ لَيْسَ لِعِلْمِهِ مُنْتَهَى” (Shaḥkh Ḥadīq, At-Tawḥīd, chap. 10, Tradition 1).

26. – Contradiction is the contemporaneous existence and nonexistence of an object—with the preservation of conditions that are set in logic and philosophy. According to many thinkers, the impossibility of a contradiction is the most axiomatic intellectual principle, whose refutation would cause the collapse of all human knowledge.

27. – The miracles of divine prophets are considered normal impossibilities. Through contemplation of the nature of these events, it can be realized that these occurrences oppose the normal workings of nature and the causal system of the world, but they are realized through unknown specific supernatural causes. Thus, it may be stated that normal impossibilities are not truly impossible; rather, our lack of knowledge regarding their specific causes, result in them being considered as a division of impossibilities.

28. – ﴿إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ﴾

29. – According to philosophers, the ability of the subject—i.e. God—in performing the act is absolute, whereas the acceptant—i.e. logical impossibility—is not capable of undergoing the act.

هر چه هست از قامت ناساز بي اندام ما است ورنه تشریف تو بر بالاي کس کوتاه نیست

All problems arise from our lack of understanding;

You are All-powerful and All-encompassing.

For further elucidation, contemplate this example: Consider a master of potter who can fashion the most beautiful of pots from clay. Instead of clay, some water is given to him and he is asked to make a pot. It is self-evident that the potter will not be successful in the least in making a pot. Clearly, this cannot be attributed to his inability or inexperience and his status as master cannot be doubted because, essentially, what he has been provided with does not have the capability of being altered into a pot. Naturally, we admit that this example and similar examples are inherently different from the issue of our discussion—the power and ability of God. Nonetheless, because of its similarity, it can be considered as an analogy in order to understand better the subject under discussion.

30. Shaḥkh Ḥadīq, Al-Tawḥīd, chap. 9, Tradition 6.

31. – ﴿إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ﴾ (For examples see: Sūrah Baqarah 2:109, 2:148, 2:259, etc.)

32. – Sūrah Aḥqāf 46:33.

33. – Shaḥkh Ḥadīq, Al-Tawḥīd, chap. 9, Tradition 15.

34. – Sūrah Baqarah 2:255, and Sūrah ‘Imrān 3:2.

35. – Sūrah Ghfir 40:65.

36. – According to Arabic grammar, if the predicate of a substantive sentence is definite it demonstrates the exclusivity of the predicate for the subject.

37. – For example, see: Sūrah Rīm 30:19, and Sūrah Ḥajj 22:66.

38. – Sūrah Furqān 25:58.

39. – Shaḥkh Ḥadīq, Al-Tawḥīd, chap. 11, Tradition 6.

40. – Of course, this attribute can also be designated as an apophatic attribute [ḥifāṭ-e salbī] and thus we can declare that God is a ‘non-temporal’ entity.

41. – This issue will be explained in further detail in the discourse on cosmology.

42. – For a more comprehensive analysis of this discussion, issues that are more complex must be brought up, which would exceed the brevity of the current discourse.

43. – Sūrah Ḥadīd 57:3.

44. – Nahj ul-Balaghah, sermon 91.
45. – Kulaḥḥ, Uḥḥ-e Kḥḥ, Chapter of Definition of Names [Maḥḥn ul-Asmḥ], vol. 1, Tradition 6.
46. – Sḥrah Qaḥaḥ 28:88.
47. – Nahj ul-Balaghah, sermon 91, p. 76.
48. – Nahj ul-Balaghah, sermon 191, p. 208.
49. – Sḥrah Mu'minḥn 23:115.
50. – Sḥrah Dukhḥn 44:38.
51. – Allḥmah Majlisḥ, Biḥḥr al-Anwḥr, vol. 5, p. 313.
52. – Sḥrah Sharḥ 94:5-6.
53. – Nahj ul-Balaghah, letter 45, p. 318.
54. – For more information, see: Sḥrah Anbiyḥ' 21:35.
55. – Sḥrah Baqarah 2:155.
56. – Nahj ul-Balaghah, sermon 143, p. 138.
57. – Sḥrah A'rḥf 7:94.
58. – Sḥrah A'rḥf 7:130.
59. – This is a Farsi proverb: “قدر عافيت كسي داند كه به مصيبتى دچار آيد”.
60. – Allḥmah Majlisḥ, Biḥḥr al-Anwḥr, vol. 3, p. 139.
61. – Sḥrah Baqarah 2:216.
62. – آنكه پر نقش زد اين دايره مينايى كس ندانست كه در گردش پرگار چه كرد
63. – This is a Farsi proverb: “خودكرده را تدبير نيست”.
64. – Sḥrah Rḥm 30:41.
65. – Nahj ul-Balaghah, wise saying 437.
66. – It is worthy of note that divine legislative and compensational justice do not solely pertain to humans; rather, they include all responsible beings. Even so, usually the main stress of this discussion is the justness of God regarding humanity. Additionally, according to the genetic relationship of retribution in the afterlife with humankind's deeds, it can be declared that, ultimately, the compensational justice of God is a subdivision of His genetic justice.
67. – Sḥrah Yḥnus 10:44.
68. – Sḥrah ḥli 'Imrḥn 3:108.
69. – Sḥrah Mu'minḥn 23:62.
70. – Sḥrah Anbiyḥ' 21:47.
71. – Sḥrah Isrḥ' 17:15.
72. – Theodicy is the philosophic science of vindication of divine justice in view of the existence of evil. [Trans.]
73. – Sḥrah Baqarah 2:115.
74. – ديدن روي تو را ديده جان بين بايد –
وين كجا مرتبة چشم جهان بين من است
75. – Sḥrah Anḥm 6:103, also see: Sḥrah A'rḥf 7:143.

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