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Lesson 68: The Purpose of Creation

Introduction

One of the important problems of metaphysics and theology (kalam) is the problem of the purpose of creation, which has been the subject of discussions and different views. On the one hand, some experts have denied that divine deeds have a purpose or final cause. On the other hand, there are those who consider the divine purpose to be to profit creatures; and there is a third group which believes in the unity of the efficient and final cause of immaterial entities.

In general, in this area there have been many views the citation and critique of which would become overlong. Therefore, first we will explain the concept of purpose and other similar philosophical expressions, then we will mention some useful introductory points in order to explain the problem and remove doubts about it, and finally, we will explain the correct meaning of divine purposefulness.

Purpose and Final Cause

The literal meaning of the word hadaf (purpose) is target. In common conversation, it means the result of a voluntary action which is the aim of a voluntary agent from the beginning and for the sake of which the action is performed, so that if the result of the action had not been taken into account, the action would not have been performed.

The result of an action is called the end (ghayah) insofar as it is the terminus of the action; it is called the purpose (hadaf or gharadh) insofar as it is taken into consideration and intended by the agent from the beginning; and it is called the final cause (‘illat-e gha’i) insofar as the result of the action is desired and this desire is the cause for the will of the agent to be directed toward the performance of the action.

However that which really influences the performance of the action is knowledge and the love of the result, not its objective existence; rather, the objective result is the effect of the action, not its cause.

The term ghayah (end) is usually used in the sense of the terminus of a motion, and the relation

between its instances and those of hadaf (purpose) is that of partial overlapping (ʿumum wa khusus min wajh), for, on the one hand, in natural motion no purpose can be considered for a natural agent, while the application of the concept of ghayah to its terminus is correct.

On the other hand, in creative acts in which there is no motion, the concept of final cause and effect can be correctly applied although there is no place here for ghayah to have the sense of a terminus of motion. However, sometimes it is used in the sense of the final cause, and here one must take care not to confuse these two senses, and not to relate the characteristics of one to the other.

The relation between agent, action and result has been the topic of numerous philosophical discussions, some of which are presented in Lesson Thirty-Nine. Now we shall begin to explain some issues pertaining to the present discussion and which are useful for explaining the correct meaning of the divine purpose of creation.

Some Points

1. Usually, the voluntary actions of human beings are performed in this way: first, there appears the idea of the action and its result, an assent of the priority of the act for obtaining the result and the benefit accruing therefrom, followed by a yearning in the soul for the good, perfection and benefit resulting from that act.

When requisite conditions obtain and obstacles are removed, one decides to perform the action, and, in fact, the main factor and stimulus for the performance of an action is the yearning for its benefits. Therefore, the final cause must be considered to be this yearning. That to which the yearning is directed is figuratively and accidentally called the final cause.

It must not be imagined that this process is necessary in all voluntary actions nor that if an agent lacks acquired knowledge and a yearning of the soul, his action will not be voluntary or lack a final cause. Rather, what is necessary in any voluntary action is knowledge and yearning in general, regardless of whether the knowledge is by presence or acquired, and whether the yearning is added to the essence or is the essence itself.

Therefore, the final cause of complete immaterial things is the same as the love of their own essences, which is subordinately, directed to their effects as well, a love which is identical to the essence of its agent. Therefore, for such cases, the efficient cause and the final cause is the essence of the agent.

2. As was indicated, an action is desired subordinate to the desire of the goodness and perfection that result from it. Therefore, the desirability of the purpose is prior to the desirability of the act, and the desirability of the act is subordinate and respectival.

However, the purpose taken into consideration in performing an action may itself be a preliminary for the achievement of a higher purpose and its desirability may take shape in the radiance of the desirability of

another thing. But, ultimately, every agent will have a final and fundamental purpose and the intermediary and proximate purposes, and the preliminaries and means, all obtain their desirability in its radiance.

Anyway, the desirability of an action is subordinate and respectival, while the priority of purpose depends on the view, intention and motivation of the agent such that it is possible for a determined purpose to be intermediary for one agent and to be the final and fundamental purpose of another agent.

3. The fundamental desirability of a purpose, and the respectival desirability of an action and means appear in the form of a yearning in the soul, and the object of this yearning is an absent perfection realizable as an effect of the action.

However, for completely immaterial entities, all of whose possible perfections actually exist, no lack of goodness or perfection can be imagined which might be attained by means of an action. In reality, it is the love of the existent perfections which is directed subordinately to its effects which causes the emanation of these effects, that is, it causes the performance of a creative action.

Hence, the desirability of action of immaterial existents is respectival and subordinate, but subordinate to an existent perfection not to the desirability of an absent perfection.

4. The deeds one performs may have numerous effects, not all of which one is conscious of or motivated to acquire. Therefore, one usually performs an action in order to acquire one of its effects or results, although it is also possible that a deed may be performed for several parallel purposes.

However, in the case of completely immaterial entities, every good effect which results from an action is considered and desired, although the desirability of each of them may be subordinate to the desirability of an existent perfection in it. But it is possible that among the subordinate desirabilities there is a relation of relative priority and subordination.

For example, although the existence of the cosmos and the existence of man, insofar as they are radiances from divine perfection, are subordinately desired by God, the Supreme, since man possesses more and higher perfections and the appearance of the cosmos is a preparation for man's appearance, therefore, the desirability of man can be considered fundamental in relation to the desirability of the cosmos.

The Purposefulness of God, the Supreme

Given the points already made, it becomes clear that the existence of a final cause for every voluntary action is necessary, whether it is creative or preparatory, whether it is instantaneous or gradual, and whether the agency is intentional, by agreement, providential or manifesting.

In reality, the final cause is something in the essence of the agent, not an external result of the deed,

and the application of the concept of final cause to an external result is figurative and accidental, because the love, satisfaction or yearning of the agent is directed toward the obtaining of it, and the finality of the external result of preparatory gradual deed, in the sense of being the terminus of motion, has no relation to a final cause. The essential end of motion is not the same as the essential final cause. (Take note.)

Therefore, divine deeds, insofar as they are voluntary, possess final causes and the fact that the divine Being is free of acquired knowledge and yearnings of the soul does not imply that the divine essence is without final causes. Likewise, this does not imply any lack of knowledge or love in the divine essence.

In other words, the denial of a motive and final cause additional to the essence for completely immaterial entities and for agents by providence, by agreement, and by manifestation, does not mean the absolute denial of purpose for them, nor that purpose is to be restricted to intentional agents.

Just as the intellect obtains concepts from the attributes of the perfections of creatures, and after divesting them of their limitations and their material and contingent implications relates them to God, the Supreme, as positive attributes, the intellect also abstracts love of the good and perfection after divesting them of imperfection and contingency and establishes them for the divine essence and considers them final causes for His actions.

Since all the divine attributes of essence are the same as His sacred essence, this attribute of love which is considered to be the final cause for creation and the source of His actual will, is the same as His essence, and, in conclusion, the efficient cause and the final cause for divine actions are the very same as His sacred essence.

Just as divine knowledge applies fundamentally to His sacred essence and subordinately to His creatures, which are aspects of His existence with differences in level and grade, divine love also applies fundamentally to His sacred essence and subordinately to the good and perfection of His creatures, and among them there is also a relative priority and subordination in being loved and desired. That is, the divine love for creatures applies in the first degree to the most perfect of them which is the first creature and then to other creatures, the most perfect [love] for the most perfect [creature], al-akmal fal-akmal.

Even among material and corporeal entities among which there is no specific gradation, one may consider the more perfect to be the purpose for the creation of the less perfect, and conversely, one may consider material things to be preparatory to the appearance of man,

"It is He who created for you all that is in the earth." (***2:29***)

Finally, one can consider the love for the Perfect Man to be the final cause for the creation of the material cosmos. In this sense, it may be said that God, the Supreme, has created the material world for the perfection of corporeal existents and for the attainment of their actual good and perfection, for every existent which possesses different levels of perfection and imperfection, the most perfect level has a

relative priority in being loved and desired.

However, this does not imply those imperfect existents or the levels that are less perfect than the existence of some existent has no level of desirability at all. In this way, one may consider there to be vertical purposes for the creation of man. That is, the final purpose is the attainment of the ultimate level of perfection, nearness to God, benefiting from the highest and most lasting emanation, eternal mercy and God's pleasure. The intermediary purpose is the realization of worship of and obedience to God, the Supreme, which are means to the attainment of the higher stations and final purpose.

The proximate purpose is the preparation of the material and social conditions and realization of the necessary knowledge for free choice of the right way of life and the spread of the worship of God in society.

For this reason, after emphasis that the creation of man and the world are not vain and absurd, and possess wisdom of purpose,[1] one finds in the Qur'an that, on the one hand, the purpose of the creation of the cosmos is to prepare the grounds for the free choice and trial of man,[2] and on the other hand, the purpose of the creation of man is declared to be the worship of God, the Supreme.[3] Finally, the ultimate purpose is considered to be proximity to the divine mercy and to benefit from eternal triumph, welfare and felicity.[4]

Considering that which has been said, a common approach among the three mentioned positions may be formulated. That is, what is meant by those who consider the final cause to be only the sacred divine essence is that the essential and fundamental object of desire for God, the Supreme, is nothing but His sacred essence which is absolute goodness and possesses infinite perfections.

And what is meant by those who deny that divine actions have final causes is that the motive for them is not something additional to the essence, and His agency is not a kind of intentional agency. And what is meant by those who declare that the final cause and the purpose of creation is the welfare of creatures or their perfection is that they wanted to explain the respectival and subordinate purposes. It may be concluded that one who holds any of these positions may interpret the other two in a way that is acceptable.

A point which must be indicated at the end of this lesson is that in discussions of will, wisdom, and the purpose of creation, we have relied upon the aspects of goodness and perfection of creatures. For this reason, the question arises as to how to justify their evils and imperfections. The answer to this question will be found in the last lesson of this section.

1. See 3:191; 38:27; 21:16–17; 44:38–39; 45:22; 14:19; 15:85; 16:3; 29:44; 30:8; 23:115.
2. See 11:7; 67:2; 18:7.
3. See 51:56; 36:61.
4. See 11:108, 119; 45:22; 3:15; 9:72.

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