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Moral Virtues and Vices

In our last discussion, we stated that the human soul possesses four distinct powers. They are: Intellect, Anger, Passion, and the Power of Imagination (*al-quwwah al-wahmiyyah* or *al-`amilah*)1. The thing we should notice now is that the purification and right training of every one of these powers will result in the emergence of a particular faculty in the human being.

The purification and rightward training of the Power of Intellect will result in the development of knowledge, and subsequently wisdom, in a human being. The purification of the Power of Anger will result in the emergence of the faculty of courage, and subsequently forebearance (*hilm*).

The purification of the Power of Passion and desire will result in the development of the, faculty of chastity, and subsequently generosity. And the purification of the Power of Imagination will cause the emergence of the faculty of justice in a human being.

The moral virtues, therefore, are: wisdom, courage, chastity, and justice. The opposite qualities of these are: ignorance2, cowardice, concupiscence (gluttony and lust), injustice and tyranny.

Wisdom means possession of an understanding of the objects of the world which concurs with the reality of things. The presence of courage and chastity means that the powers of anger and desire are entirely at the command of the intellect and completely free from the bondages of concupiscence and egoism.

As for justice, it refers to the condition when the Power of Imagination is completely under the command of the Power of the Intellect. This implies the regulation of all the powers of the soul by the Power of Intellect. In other words, the presence of the faculty of justice in the soul necessitates the presence of the other three faculties of wisdom, courage and chastity.

An important matter must be pointed out here. In the view of Islamic ethicians, a person who has developed the four faculties within himself, is not praiseworthy unless the possession of these virtues benefits other people also. This is what reason tells us. That is, it tells us that purely internal and private virtues do not have much value, and their possessor does not deserve praise.

Moderation and Deviation

Every one of the four ethical virtues is to be practised to a certain degree and within definite limits, transgression of which would transform a virtue into a vice. If every virtue is thought of as the center of a circle, any movement away from the center would be considered as a vice, and the farther away it were to move from this point, the greater the vice.

For every virtue, therefore, there are innumerable vices; since there is only one center in a circle, whereas points all around the center are infinite in number. In regard to deviation, it does not make difference in which direction the deviation occurs. Deviation from the center, in whatever direction, is a vice.

To find the real center, which entails absolute moderation, is thus difficult to attain. To remain at this center and to preserve this balance is even more difficult. The Prophet (S) said:

(شيبتني سورة هود لمكان ((فَاسْتَقِمْ كَمَا أُمِرْتَ

The *Surat Hud* has made an old man of me because of the verse, ***`Remain as steadfast as you have been commanded'.*** (***11:112***)

As opposed to the real center, there is the approximate center, which is more accessible. Individuals who purify and develop their souls usually reach this relative center and acquire relative moderation. It is for this reason that moral virtues differ with different individuals, circumstances, and times. Relative moderation, like deviation, covers a wide area at the center of which lies the point of absolute balance and moderation.

The Various Types of Vice

We have already said that deviation from moderation and the mean causes vice. This deviation towards either of the two extremes on each side of the mean has infinite degrees. Here we will mention only the two extremes for every moral virtue.

Deficiency

- stupidity
- cowardice
- lethargy
- submissiveness

Moderation

- wisdom
- courage
- chastity
- justice

Excess

- slyness
- foolhardiness
- rapaciousness
- tyranny

There are, therefore, eight kinds of vices, for every one of which we shall give a brief description.

1. Stupidity is deficiency of wisdom; that is, not using the power of the intellect to understand the nature of things.

2. Slyness is the excessive use of the intellect; that is, using the power of the intellect in matters for which it is inappropriate, or using it too much in matters for which it is appropriate.

3. Cowardice is deficiency of courage; that is, fear and irresolution in cases where there is no cause for them.

4. Foolhardiness is the excess of courage; that is, reckless action in cases where it is inappropriate.

5. Lethargy is the deficient state for which the point of moderation is chastity; that is, failure to use things which the body needs.

6. Rapaciousness is the other extreme in opposition to lethargy; that is, excess in sexual activity, eating and drinking, and other sensual pleasures.

7. Submissiveness is the deficient state for which the point of moderation is justice; that is, accepting oppression and tyranny.

8. Tyranny is the other extreme in opposition to submissiveness; that is, oppressing either one's own self or others.

Every one of these eight vices possesses numerous branches and subdivisions, which are connected with the direction and degree of deviation from moderation represented by the four virtues. Since deviation can occur in a limitless number of degrees, it is not possible to enumerate all of them. We shall, however, mention some of the most well-known ones here, and later discuss the ways in which they can be fought against.

Vices are divided according to the powers they are related to, namely, Intellect, Anger and Passion.

1. The Power of the Intellect (*al-quwwah al-`aqliyyah*) can possess two kinds of vices, which are stupidity and slyness, the further subdivisions of which are as follows:

Simple ignorance: not knowing.

Compound ignorance: being ignorant, and being unaware of one's ignorance.

Perplexity and doubt: the opposite of which are certainty and conviction.

Carnal temptations: in opposition to which is contemplation of the beauty of Divine creation.

Deceit and trickery to attain ends dictated by Passion and Anger.

Shirk (polytheism): the opposite of which is belief in the Unity and Oneness of God.

2. The Power of Anger (*al-quwwah al-ghadabiyyah*) has two vices: cowardice and foolhardiness, the subdivisions of which are:

Fear: a psychological condition which is caused by expecting occurrence of a painful event, or loss of a favourable condition.

Lack of endurance and self-depreciation: This is one of the consequences of weakness of the spirit and indicates an incapacity to face hardships. The opposite of this characteristic is steadfastness, which means the capacity to endure hardship and adversity.

Timidity: this is brought about by a lack of self-confidence and a weak character, and indicates inability to struggle for the sake of attaining noble and worthy goals. The opposite of this vice is the virtue of fortitude; that is, courage and willingness to undertake great efforts to attain true felicity and perfection.

Lack of sense of dignity: this is also brought about by a weakness of character and indicates failure to take care and watch over matters which need to be looked after and watched over.

Hastiness: this is another manifestation of a weak character and means making decisions and embarking on actions without having given them proper thought. The opposite extreme of this quality is lethargy, which is the tendency to slackness and lack of alacrity in initiating action when required.

Suspicion about God, and the believers: this is another manifestation of a weak and timid character. The opposite of this is trustfulness towards God and the believers, which is a sign of courage and self confidence.

Anger: the opposite of which is patience and forbearance (*hilm*).

Revengefulness: the opposite of which is the quality of forgiveness.

Violence: this is caused by the Power of Anger and use of force to achieve an end. Its opposite is conciliation and compassion.

Ill-temperedness: the opposite of which is good-temperedness.

Envy and malice: it also results from the Power of Anger.

Enmity and. hostility: this is a manifestation of the power of anver and its opposite is friendliness; in other words, having the welfare of others at heart.

Self-conceit and vanity: the opposite extreme of which is having an inferiority complex.

Arrogance: the opposite of which is humility.

Boastfulness: which means talking about oneself with pride and satisfaction. This condition is brought about by arrogance.

Rebelliousness: disobedience towards someone who deserves one's

Obedience. This condition is also caused by arrogance, and its opposite is obedience to someone to whom it is necessary to be obedient.

Fanaticism: intense uncritical devotion to something.

Injustice and concealing of *truth:* the opposite of which is justice and steadfastness in the defense of truth.

Brutality: lack of mercy and compassion when these qualities are called for.

3. The vices of the Power of Passion and desire are lethargy and greed; and their subdivisions are the following:

Coveting the world and riches: the opposite of which is *zuhd* (self restraint).

Affluence and opulence: the opposite of which is poverty.

Avarice (*tama*)*:* the opposite of which is indifference to possessions of others.

Greed (*hirs*)*:* the opposite of which is contentment with what one has.

Coveting of things forbidden by religion, and engaging in illegitimate acts: the opposite of which is *wara`* (piety, caution), abstinence from forbidden things and activities.

Treachery: the opposite of which is honesty.

All kinds of debauchery: such as adultery, sodomy, wine drinking, and other forms of frivolous conduct.

Sinking into falsehood and believing in false things.

Indulging in frivolous and nonsensical talk *and empty boasting as a matter of habit.*

Thus we come to the end of recounting the virtues and vices belonging singly to each of the three powers. Now let us consider those virtues and vices which belong simultaneously to two or three of the powers of the soul. These virtues and vices are as follows:

Jealousy, that is wishing a decline in the fortunes of another person.

Insulting and degrading other people: the opposite of which is honouring other people and respecting them.

Not being sympathetic or helpful to others.

Flattery.

Breaking one's ties with family and kin.

Being undutiful to parents and earning their *disavowal.*

Sticking one's nose into other people's affairs in order to discover their faults.

Revealing other people's secrets: the opposite of which is guarding other people's secrets and concealing them.

Causing friction and disharmony among people: the opposite of which is to make peace and bring harmony among them.

Cursing.

Verbal argument and animosity.

Making fun of other people and ridiculing them.

Backbiting.

Lying.

Coveting fame and station.

Lover of praise and hatred of criticism: the opposite of which is indifference to both.

Simulation: which is doing something in order to attract favourable attention.

Hypocrisy: the opposite of which is being the same in one's exterior appearance and inward self.

Self-deception: the opposite of which is insight, knowledge and humility.

Rebelliousness: the opposite of which is obedience.

Impudence and shamelessness: the opposite of which is modesty and shame.

Having elaborate and far-flung hopes and desires.

Persistence in sin: the opposite of which is repentence.

Self-neglect and alienation from one's self: the opposite of which is self-attention and awareness of one's goal.

Apathy and indifference towards one's felicity and good.

Misplaced hatred: the opposite of which is appropriate friendship and love.

Inconsistency and disloyalty: the opposite of which is loyalty.

Isolation and seclusion from people: the opposite of which is being sociable and friendly.

Pique and peevishness: the opposite of which is calmness and selfcomposure.

Sorrow and remorse: the opposite of which is cheerfulness and *joy.*

Insufficient trust of and reliance on God.

Ingratitude and unthankfulness: the opposite of which is thankfulness and gratitude.

Anxiety, alarm and impatience.

Impiety: that is disobedience and transgression of Divine commands, the opposite of which is piety and obedient performance of the duties set by God, and also performance of acts which are recommended by God.

The Importance of Justice

Now that we have recounted all the virtues and vices, it is necessary to gain an understanding of the true significance of the quality of justice, since all ethical virtues originate from this quality just as all vices emanate from injustice, which is the quality opposed to it. Plato says:

When the faculty of justice develops in man, all the other faculties and powers of the soul are illuminated by it, and these faculties and powers all acquire light from each other. This is the condition in which the human soul moves and acts in the best and the most meritorious manner possible, gaining affinity and reapproachment with the Source of creation.

The quality of justice saves the human being from the danger of deviation towards extremes, whether in personal or social matters, and enables him to attain enduring felicity and bliss. Of course, it should be noted that this quality can be successfully exercised only if the individual knows what the Golden Mean is, and can distinguish it from excess when he confronts it.

Such discrimination is impossible to attain except through the holy teachings of Islam, which contain elaborate instructions relating to all the things needed by human beings to attain happiness and felicity in this world and the next.

Various Kinds of Justice

Justice is of three kinds:

1. The justice between the human being and God; that is, the penalties and rewards which God bestows on man in relation to his acts and deeds. In other words, for whatever acts he commits, whether good or evil, an appropriate reward or punishment is given to him by God. If it were otherwise, it would imply injustice and violation of rights on God's behalf and unfair treatment of His creatures –characteristics which God does not have.

2. The justice amongst human beings; which means that everyone must honour individual and social rights of others and act according to the sacred laws of Islam. This is called social justice. In a prophetic tradition, social rights are enumerated in the following manner:

> إن للمؤمن على أخيه ثلاثين حقا لا براءة له منها إلا بالأداء أو العفو: يغفر زلته، ويرحم عبرته، ويستر عورته، ويقيل عثرته، ويقبل معذرته، ويرد غيبته، ويديم نصيحته، ويحفظ خلته، ويرعى ذمته، ويعود مرضته ويشهد ميتته، ويجيب دعوته، ويقبل هديته، ويكافأ صلته، ويشكر نعمته، ويحسن نصرته، ويحفظ خليلته، ويقضى حاجته، ويشفع مسألته، ويسمّت عطسته ويرشد ضالته، ويرد سلامه ويطيب كلامه ويبر إنعامه، ويصدق أقسامه، ويوالى وليه ويعادي عدوه، وينصره ظالماً ومظلوماً، فأما نصرته ظالما فيرده عن ظلمه، وأما نصرته مظلوماً فيعينه على اخذ حقه، ولا يسلمه، ولا يخذله، ويحب له من الخير ما يحب لنفسه، ويكره له من الشر ما يكره لنفسه.

Every believer has thirty obligations over his brother in faith, which he could not be said to have met unless he either performs them or is excused by his brother in faith from performing them.

These obligations are: forgiving his mistakes; being merciful and kind to him when he is in a strange land; guarding his secrets; giving him his hand when he is about to fall; accepting his apology; discouraging backbiting about him; persisting in giving him good advice; treasuring his friendship; fulfilling his trust; visiting him when he is ill; being with him at the time of his death; accepting his invitation and his presents; returning his favours in the same manner; thanking him for his favours; being grateful for his assistance; protecting his honour and property.

Helping him meet his needs; making an effort to solve his problems; saying to him: `God bless you', when he sneezes; guiding him to the thing he has lost; answering his greetings; taking him at his word (not drawing a bad interpretation of things he says); accepting his bestowals; confirming him if he swears to something; being kind and friendly towards him, not unsympathetic and hostile; helping him whether he is being unjust or is a victim of injustice [when we speak of helping him when he is being unjust, we mean that he must be kept from being unjust; when we speak of coming to his aid when he is a victim of injustice, we mean that he should be assisted in securing his rights]; refraining from feeling bored or fed up of him; not forsaking him in the midst of his troubles.

Whatever good things he likes for himself he should also like for his brother in faith, and whatever he dislikes for himself he should also dislike for his brother.

3. Justice between the living and the dead. This is the kind of justice that commands that the living should remember the dead with kindness, pay their debts, act according to their wills, pray for them, give alms seeking their forgiveness from God, and perform charitable acts in their memory.

Self-development

At the end of this section, the conclusion that we draw is that justice means the complete mastery of the intellect overall other faculties and powers of the human soul, so that all are employed towards the ultimate goal of human perfection and the end of making oneself Godlike. In other words, the intellect is the sovereign of the body; if justice prevails within it, it will also prevail in the domain under its jurisdiction. Just as if the ruler of a society is just, justice shall expand throughout that whole society, whereas if the ruler is unjust, then there will be no justice in that country. This is expressed in a narration:

> إن السلطان إذا كان عادلا كان شريكا في ثواب كل طاعة تصدر عن كل رعية، وإن كان جائرا كان سهيما في معاصيهم

Whenever a sovereign is just, he shares in the reward and merit of all the good works done by his

subjects; but if he is not just, he will be considered an accomplice in all their sins and evil deeds.

Another conclusion that can be drawn is that one cannot reform others as long as he has not reformed himself. That is, if an individual is unable to make justice prevail within the domain of his own individual self, how can he put it into effect amongst his partners, family members, fellow citizens, and finally, the whole society? Therefore, self-development is necessarily prior to all else, and this is impossible except through the science of ethics.

1. The Power of Imagination is also called the "practical intellect", which is the counterpart of the "speculative intellect". The "speculative intellect" comprehends the notions of virtue and vice and gives advice and guidance. The "practical intellect" puts the directives of the "speculative intellect" into effect and follows its orders. The directive of the "speculative intellect" are always directed at the regulation of the powers of passion and anger in the human being .
2. Ignorance or Jahl, are here used in a wider-than-ordinary sense. "Jahl" here stands in opposition to "`aql" (reason or "hikmah" (wisdom), not in opposition to "`ilm" (knowledge).

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