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Section One: The Human Essence

As far as the history of human knowledge shows, we humans have continuously endeavored to discover our station in the world and our relationship with other creatures. These endeavors were obstructed at the very beginning of history and today, this obstruction has not been relieved even in advanced scientific communities. Humanity's existence is not analogous to the existence of other natural entities.

It seems that among the discovered creatures in nature, we humans are unique and that our existence is not in concord with the image of the natural world. The existence of humans in this collection has made it difficult to explain and elucidate this structure overall. Experts in natural science tell us that the world is made up of chaotic and mindless physical particles.

However, we perceive ourselves as purposeful and intellectual creatures. How can a creature with awareness come about in a world full of mindless particles? How can the mechanical world produce an entity that can present itself unto the world? How can we conceive of an essentially purposeless world that nurtures beings with transcendent purposes? How can a being with free will emerge from a world that according to determinism has foreshadowed its elements? Yea, human qualities and attributes have resulted in these questions and have made the coordination of humans and other natural beings challenging.

According to common belief, human qualities reside in two general vessels: body and soul. Languages attest to the existence of this common belief. There are two types of concepts in all languages. Consequently, we are faced with two classes of statements that possess a common subject (humans) with the variation of the predicate. For instance, regard these two statements:

Mary is 90 pounds.

Mary hopes to attend college.

One class of statements, like the first, describes the states and conditions of the human body. Even though the predicate of this type of statement relates to the human body, it is usually common with other

corporeal beings, such as predicates that indicate weight, shape, or size. In contrast, other statements, such as the second sentence, sometimes mostly and sometimes absolutely pertain to humans and do not indicate bodily statuses. These predicates encompass thought, reasoning, deduction, love, intimacy, faith, etc. As a result, in studying humans, we are faced with two sets of qualities:

Material or corporeal attributes such as heat, size, color, weight, etc.

Incorporeal or spiritual attributes such as fear, love, courage, aspiration, hope, etc.

These two classes are essentially different. For example, the attributes in the first class are obvious and can be perceived with the senses. However, the attributes of the second class, such as sorrow, belief, fear, impatience, etc. are not such. The first type of states can be perceived by everyone; yet, the second type can only be cognized by the person experiencing them. Each individual's intentions are clear to themselves but obscure to others. No one can hide their height or width, nevertheless intentions, sorrow, and happiness can be concealed.

Additionally, the manner in which an individual realizes each of these qualities is not the same. For example, we can feel pain without any intermediates. Therefore, if someone asks us, "How do you know you have pain?", we would deem the question irrational. However, becoming aware of a physical disorder such as a gastric ulcer requires reasoning. Consequently, if someone asks, "How do you know that you have an ulcer?", we would have to present our reasons, which may be the physician's diagnosis. Therefore, at least the three factors of spatiality, general exposure, and indirect accessibility dissociate corporeal qualities from spiritual qualities.

The public, scientists, and philosophers all agree on this matter. Everyone concurs with the duality of all languages regarding humans, which indicates duality in humanity's attributes and characteristics. Here, the question exists: Are these two classes based on one essential aspect or two disparate essential aspects that, while linked, are independent of one other and can be intellectually separated? Advocates of the first theory are called monists and supporters of the second theory are called dichotomists or dualists.[1]

The first view states that the first-class attributes—that describe the human body—are fundamental human attributes and each of the second-class attributes depend upon the quality of the first class.

Consequently, second-class attributes cannot exist without first-class attributes. For example, "hope" is a function of specific states within the human body, especially the brain and the nervous system. Thus, we do not possess two distinct and independent aspects; rather, humans are similar to machines comprised of cellular blocks and have two distinct classes of attributes. However, they both, directly or indirectly, pertain to the human body such that visualizing a person without a standard body is visualizing the inexistence of that person.

Advocates of the second view however, have discovered these attributes so inherently different that they

have attributed the first class to the body and the second class to another entity called soul. Some have even stressed that the soul equates with the human identity. Even though these two entities are linked in a mysterious and mystical manner and they create a single human identity in this world, one can imagine them existing apart from each other. It is worthy of note that the issue of the intercommunication of the body and soul—according to this view—or mental states—according to the first view—has been problematic throughout history.

Duality of Humans and Our Rationale

Advocates of the second view maintain that our introversive contemplations attest to this duality. Each of us discovers a truth within ourselves separate of our body, which we call “self”. This “self” signifies our essence as opposed to our bodies; it is not identifiable with our bodies. This averment includes various rationales some of which are enumerated below.

In every person, there exist actions and manifestations that cannot be rendered as pertaining to the body. The body cannot manage these phenomena; however, they must have an originator. Since the body cannot be considered the author of these occurrences, they must be predicated by another entity. We call this entity the soul. Intuitive perception, thought, analysis, judgment, religious experience, emotions, and sentiments are a number of phenomena that signify the existence of the soul.

Contrary to other creatures in existence, human actions do not occur according to a standard routine. Human actions are not similar in identical situations. This makes it almost impossible to predict human behavior. Discovering the laws governing human behavior is not like discovering the laws governing natural objects. This rationale is indicative of the element of free will. Explaining and interpreting free will based on mechanical determinist laws of nature is not possible.

We relate all our internal and external actions to our “self”. We say, “I walk”, “I see”, “I think”, etc. Since there in no organ in the body to which we may attribute all our actions, it is revealed that there is a distinct aspect to humans that is transcendent to the body and that holds the status of originator of all actions. In addition, we can say regarding the body and its parts, “my hand=hand belonging to the self”, “my heart=heart belonging to the self”, etc. We can clearly perceive an “otherness” between the noun (i.e. hand, heart, etc.) and the pronoun (i.e. my). Because this apprehension is intuitive and thus infallible, it is conclusive evidence that we have a dual constitution.[2]

Moreover, in differentiation of natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences, scientific philosophers stress issues that indicate the duality of the human constitution. The following issues have resulted in the natural sciences overshadowing the liberal arts:

Existence of free will in humans and the superfluity of causality and determinism in virtue of this factor

The purposefulness of humanity

Incorporeality of the Soul

Our previous rationales indicate that those who advocate the existence of the soul both stress the identification of self with the soul and its incorporeality. An incorporeal entity is an entity that transcends material attributes such as volume, mass, direction, shape, size, location, time, etc. After proving the disparity of the body and soul, Islamic researchers have brought various arguments for the incorporeality of the soul. Here, we shall briefly discuss these arguments.

One of the properties of corporeal entities is their divisibility. Scientifically, all material objects can be divided into smaller parts, even though this may be unfeasible in practice. On the other hand, we distinctly realize that dividing “self” into two or more constituents in meaningless and impossible. Thus, the human soul is not a material and divisible object.

Moreover, human capacities, such as our capacity for knowledge, are inexhaustible, but unlimited affairs cannot be explained in terms of the human body.

The modern science of parapsychology speaks of mental phenomena that support existence of the soul. These phenomena are divided into two groups:

Phenomena that do not necessitate life after death, but are credible evidence of the incorporeality of humans: These include psychokinesis (PK) and extrasensory perception (ESP) in its various forms, such as telepathy and clairvoyance.

Phenomena that are related to life after death: These include communication with the dead by means of mediums, revival of the dead, and out-of-body experiences.

In telepathy, the thoughts in one person’s mind are transferred to the mind of another without using normal channels of communication under conditions that cannot be regarded as chance, such as mental communication over vast distances through steel shields. Clairvoyance is the knowledge of objects and affairs without the intermediacy of sensory organs and without physical contact of the clairvoyant with the perceived object. Psychokinesis is the ability to move objects by mental effort without using physical devices.[3]

In short, these affairs, which are called paranormal phenomena, attribute abilities to humans that cannot be explained in terms of the physical framework, from subatomic and submolecular approaches to neurological and physiological approaches.

Below is a summary of the theories about the human nature as regards the issue of immortality:

The human being is an indissoluble unity and its entire existence is limited to its corporeal frame. The

monotheist advocates of this theory believe in the existence and perpetuity of humans after death in a future age.

Humans have a dual constitution with disparate and heterogeneous qualities. Most supporters of human immortality advocate this theory, although, they are divided into two groups:

Those who believe in the duality of the human nature, however, because they identify humans with their souls, they understand that only the spiritual aspect is immortal.

Those who regard the identity of humans as the sum of their body and soul; therefore, they regard humans as a spiritual–corporeal entity in all aspects of existence.

Aspects of Human Existence in the Qur'an

﴿ثم جعلناه نطفة في قرار مكين. ثم خلقنا النطفة علقة فخلقنا العلقة مضغة فخلقنا المضغة عظاما فكسونا العظام لحما ثم انشأناه خلقا اخر فتبارك الله احسن الخالقين﴾

"Then We made it a sperm in a secure receptacle (womb). Then of the sperm We created blood-clot, next of the blood-clot We created tissue, and then of the tissue We created bones, afterwards We covered the bones with flesh, and then We originated within it a different existence. Glory be to Allah, the fairest of creators."[4]

﴿ثمّ سوّاه و نَفَخَ فيه من روحِهِ و جعل لكم السمع و الابصار و الافئدة﴾

"Then He shaped it and breathed in it of His spirit and He appointed for you ears, eyes, and hearts."[5]

﴿و يسئلونك عن الروح قل الروح من امر ربي و ما اوتيتم من العلم إلا قليلاً﴾

"And they ask you about the soul; say, 'The soul is my Lord's Command and you have not been given knowledge save a little.'"[6]

﴿ألا له الخلق و الامر﴾

"Know that Creation and Command solely belong to Him."[7]

﴿انّما امره اذا اراد شيئاً ان يقول له كن فيكون﴾

"His Command is such, when He wants something, the moment He says to it, 'be' it immediately is."[8]

Commentary and Interpretation

As can be seen, the first verse previously mentioned contains terms that signify the corporeal structure of humans and its origination. The stages of development of the body are distributed through a determined time span. In each stage, the simpler form slowly evolves into a more complex anatomy. The stages of embryo and fetus growth are identified as sperm/zygote [nu□fah], blood-clot ['alaqah], tissue [mu□ghah], bone ['i□□m], and flesh/muscle [lahm]. These stages encompass the introduction of the sperm into the uterus throughout the emergence of the human limbs. From beginning to end, this body feeds from nature, develops within it, and ultimately returns to it.

The term "سوّاه" [saww□hu] in the second verse indicates the period of anatomical formation. At the end of this period, as it is also indicated at the conclusion of the first verse, something occurs that is essentially different from the previous stages. Here the Qur'an speaks of a "different existence" in contrast to the previous gradual stages. In order to describe this stage, the verb "انشأ" [ansha'a] was used. According to the second verse, the "originated" being is the soul [r□h] that is firmly established in the body by the "divine breath". We cannot say that the soul is breathed into the body from the outside; however, it is evident that the origination of the soul is inherently different from preceding occurrences. Henceforth, the body is charged with an abode of the soul. Prior to the establishment of the soul, this body had eyes, but did not see; it had ears, but did not hear; it had a form but no content. The body was matter therefore possessed the qualities of matter. Yet now, this matter has been transferred to a different level, that is, adorned with qualities such as awareness, life, knowledge, volition, etc.

We can only see the body; therefore, the question is, "What kind of creature is this esoteric and imperceptible entity?" This question is answered by the third verse, which identifies the soul as the Lord's Command [amr].

The second verse, in a manner, attributes the soul to God; while the third verse clarifies that this attribution means that the soul is God's Command. However, what does "Command" mean? The fourth verse provides the answer. God identifies some of His creatures as "Creation" and some as "Command". Thus, in a manner of speaking, there are two extant worlds: the world of Creation and the world of Command. Usually, the Qur'an identifies these worlds as the Manifest world and the Invisible world. The Invisible world is the world that cannot be perceived by the senses and is considered the spiritual or inner world [□lam al-ba□in], whereas the Manifest world is discernible and apparent. Humans partake of both worlds; they are the conjunction of the natural and supernatural or the Manifest and Invisible planes. The human soul is an entity of Command and has no kinship with the corporeal world, while the human body has developed in the context of nature.

Yea, humans have both form [□□hir] and essence [b□□in], both eyes and perception, both brain and

mind since they have both body and soul. The human body is discernible to all; however, its soul is hidden to all but itself. The soul is the individual's sanctum. It is so profound that at times, its depths are obscure even to the self and thus must be discovered. The body is alive, energetic, and animated as long as its soul is its confidant. When the soul, which was established within the body by the Divine Breath, is recalled by the draw and summons of the Lord, the body submits to silence.

The fifth verse reveals that entities of Command—such as the soul—transcend time, space, and gradual conditions, and that they occur at the behest of the Divine.[9]

In short, we explained that:

According to the Qur'an, humans are the integration of body and soul

The soul is incorporeal since it belongs to the world of Command

1. – These are the major theories regarding the human constitution. However, there are minority theories regarding the nature of the person, such as trichotomism, which states that humans are made up of three distinct components: body, soul, and spirit. [trans.]
2. – One might say that in normal speech we use terms such as "my essence=essence belonging to the self" or "myself=self belonging to the self". We must bear in mind that in these cases, we do not intuitively apprehend discord or otherness between the possessive and noun; and with little thought, we realize that these two are in fact, one and the same.
3. – For more information, see: John Hick, Philosophy of Religion.
4. – S□rah Mu'min□n 23:13–14.
5. – S□rah Sajdah 32:9.
6. – S□rah Isr□' 17:85.
7. – S□rah A'r□f 7:54.
8. – S□rah Y□s□n 36:82.
9. – For more information refer to All□mah □ab□□ab□□, Tafs□r-e Al-M□z□n (Al-M□z□n Exegesis), vol. 13, pp. 196–198; and All□mah □ab□□ab□□, Ras□'il-e Taw□□d□ (Monotheistic Disquisitions), Disquisition of Humans before this World, pp. 169–170.

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