

The Quran and the Nature of Life

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The Qur'an and the Nature of Life

This is the second of a series of three related articles by Martyr Murtadha Mutahhari on topics relating to soul, life, and evolution and published in a collection entitled *Maqalat-e falsafi* (Philosophical Essays).

The Persian titles of these essays are: “*Asalat-e ruh*,” “*Qur'an wa hayat*,” and “*Tawhid wa takammul*”.

There are three more essays in this collection entitled: “*Pursishha-ye falsafi-ye Abu Rayhan az Bu `Ali*,” “*Asl-e tadadd dar falsafah-ye Islami*,” and “*Bahth-e harakat*.”

Here we intend to carry out a Qur'anic study of the problem of life to find out the specific viewpoint of the Qur'an about life. In particular, we intend to study the view that the Qur'an takes of the relation between life and the supranatural world and Divine will.

The Noble Qur'an recurrently mentions life. In many of its verses, the coming to life of creatures, the different stages of life, the system involved in the creation of living creatures, the effects of life such as intelligence, consciousness, perception, hearing, sight, guidance, inspiration, instinct and the like are mentioned as the 'signs' indicative of Divine wisdom and design. Each of these constitutes an interesting

subject in itself, but here we do not intend to discuss them.

One of the themes discussed by the Qur'an in relation to life is that life is in the hands of God; it is God Who gives and takes away life. By this, the Noble Qur'an means that life is not within the control of anyone except God; no one else can give life or take it away. The issue that we now intend to discuss is this.

In the *Surat al Baqarah*, the Qur'an quotes Abraham (A) as saying to a tyrant of his time:

“My Lord is He Who gives life and causes to die.” (2:258)

In the *Surat al Mulk*, God is described in these words:

“... He Who created death and life.” (67:2)

There are many verses in the Qur'an which consider God as the sole giver of life (*Muhyi*) and death (*Mumit*), and the giving and taking away of life is directly attributed to God and considered His exclusive prerogative. Also, in the verses where some of the prophets are described as bringing the dead to life, the Qur'an is careful to point out that such a thing could occur only with God's permission (*idhn*). An example is verse 3:49 .

“...a Messenger to the Children of Israel saying, “I have come to you with a sign from your Lord. I will create for you out of clay as the likeness of a bird, then I will breathe into it, and it will be a bird, by the leave of God. I will also heal the blind and the leper, and bring to life the dead, by the leave of God” (3:49)

On the whole, it is one of the points of difference between the theists (*ilahiyyun*) and the materialists that whereas the theists consider the origin and source of life and its Creator as transcending matter, the materialists consider matter itself to be the creator of life.

However, something which is significant in this regard is that there is a subtle but enormous difference between the logic of the Qur'an and the usual logic of the theists regarding the thesis that God is the creator of life. This subtle difference is another of the miraculous characteristics of this noble scripture.

We believe that if theistic thinkers become familiar with this logic, they can, once for all, release themselves from the harassment of the materialists and also liberate those poor creatures too from the clutches of their fancies and error.

The Problem of Origin of Life

Ordinarily, when (theistic) thinkers want to relate the matter of life to God and Divine will, they bring up the problem of origin of life on the earth and the question regarding the cause of the first emergence of life. Conclusive scientific evidence indicates that life had a definite beginning on the surface of the earth,

that none of the various types of living creatures, including animals and plants, have always existed since eternity.

This is because the earth itself has a limited age. Moreover, it was not in its estimated life of several million years always fit for life. We observe that each individual of a species is always born from another individual belonging to that species.

Wheat comes from wheat, barley from barley, horse from horse, camel from camel, and man from man. It is not the practice of nature that an animal or plant, for instance, should come into existence from a mass of sheer dust. Always, the origin of a living creature is traceable to another living creature from which it separates in the form of a seed or sperm and grows in a suitable location.

Now, how did life start in the beginning and through what means? Does every one of these innumerable species end in an individual living creature that is the source of its particular species? If that is the case, how did that first creature come into existence, for nature seems to disallow the emergence of a living creature without a seed, sperm or something that should have separated from a living creature?

Hence, (they point out), we must admit that an exception to the rule must have occurred. In other words, a miracle had occurred and the Divine hand had emerged from the hidden to create that first living creature.

Or is it possible that all these species have had a single source and root, and are members of a family of species? On the basis of this hypothesis, too, we confront the same problem. That is, even if we suppose all the species to have been derived from a single unicellular organism, the same question emerges as to how that first living creature came into existence.

Isn't it the case that science has proved that a living creature cannot come into existence except from another living creature? Hence, was there an exception to the rule and a miracle, in that the will of God interfered to create instantaneously a living cell?

It is here that the adherents of the materialist outlook are forced to put forward certain hypotheses which are incredible to themselves. The theists, on the contrary, consider it as an evidence for the existence of a creator and state that a supernatural power did interfere to create the first living creature, and that it was the will of God that led to its emergence.

Such was the view of Darwin, who was personally a theist. After having solved the problem of the branching out of species for himself, he arrives at one or several living creatures who first emerged on the earth's surface without having been reproduced by another living creature. He says regarding them: 'As for these, they came to life through the Divine breath.'

Crissy Morrisen, in the book "The Secret of Man's Creation", says in this regard:

Some say that the corpuscles of life escaped from one of the planets and after wandering in the

atmosphere for ages and consecutive centuries descended on the earth's surface. Such a belief is not acceptable, because it is impossible that they should have survived the space's absolute cold, and even if, supposedly, they could survive that danger, the cosmic rays that are scattered in space would have destroyed them.

Even if they could pass through this stage, they must have come down accidentally in a very favourable point such as oceanic depths, where several conditions existed simultaneously and a suitable environment was created for them. After all these problems, the question still arises about the origin of life and as to how it did emerge in other planets.

Today it has been proved for certain that no environment however favourable and conducive to life can create it. Similarly, no kind of chemical synthesis or combination can create a life corpuscle. The problem of life still remains one of the unsolved problems of science.

Some say that a miniscule particle of matter, of a microscopic size, coagulating with a large number of particles of atomic size, disturbed their equilibrium and assumed the form of life through their inclusion and exclusion. Nonetheless, no one has claimed until now that he has produced life with the means of chemical action and reaction.

By this discussion Crissy Morrisen intends to prove that the hand of a creator is involved in the origin and beginning of life, because it cannot be explained by material or natural causes.

Concerning the origins of man and the great metamorphosis that resulted in the emergence of an intelligent creature with an extraordinary capacity for discursive thought and a power that could create the sciences, he says: "The emergence of man as an intelligent and thoughtful creature is too profound to be considered an effect of material changes in which a creator's hand was not involved." This was a sample of the mode of thought and argument of this group in relation to life and the Divine will. There is no need to cite more or less similar statements of others that do not differ essentially from the passage quoted.

As we know, till now man has not been able, despite all his efforts, to produce with scientific means the substance that makes up the living creatures. For instance, he has been unable to produce with chemical substances an artificial wheat grain possessing the properties of a living grain, which may grow into a plant when sown and develop ears.

Nor has he been able to produce artificially the sperm of an animal or man with the capacity to develop into an animal or man. Nevertheless, scientists have not ceased in their efforts, and as yet it has not become conclusively clear for them whether they would be able to do so in the future or if this matter lies beyond man's scientific and technical capacities.

This topic too, which relates to the future has, like the problem of the origin of life, created a controversy throughout the world. Inevitably, that group of theists who, with their above-mentioned approach and

logic, say that the creation of life is in the hands of God, are of the opinion that, in this question too, man's efforts in the field are bound to be fruitless.

Since man has no control over life, which is exclusively subject to the Divine will, man cannot create life anytime at his will with the scientific and technical means at his disposal. The prophets who raised the dead were able to do so with the leave of God. It is not possible for anyone to perform such an act without the permission of God.

And should anyone want to do such a thing with the leave of God, it would mean that such a man has joined the ranks of the prophets and performed a miracle, and, of course, God does not carry out a miracle except at the hands of His prophets and *awliya*.

This group of theists consider man's present incapacity in this regard as the proof of their claim. When they observe that man has produced wheat grains that do not differ in any way in their chemical composition from natural wheat but are devoid of the characteristics of life, they point out that that is because life depends exclusively on the will of God and the creation of life requires God's permission, which He does not give to anyone except His apostles.

We said that the Noble Qur'an explicitly affirms that life lies in the hands of God and that it negates the role of anyone else in the creation of life. However, the Qur'an never refers to the matter of the origin of the human species or the beginning of life in order to affirm this point.

On the contrary, it points as evidence to the present empirical order and considers the current, ongoing system of life as the system of creation, becoming and development. But when it wishes to describe God's creatorhood in relation to life, it does not make recourse to the first day. In this respect, it makes no distinction between the first day and the subsequent days.

Rather, it points to the present orderly changes of life as the changes of creation. For instance, in the blessed Surat al-Mu'minun it states:

"We created man of an extraction of clay, then We set him, a drop, in a receptacle secure, then We created of the drop a clot, then We created of the clot a tissue, then We created of the tissue bones, then We garmented the bones in flesh; thereafter We produced him as another creature. So blessed be God, the fairest of creators!" (23: 12–14)

This noble verse mentions the systematic transformation and changes that occur in the embryo and considers these developments as a developing series of creations. In the Surat Nuh, it states:

"What ails you, that you look not for majesty in God, seeing He created you by stages?" (71: 13–14)

In the Surat al-Zumar, it states:

“He creates you in your mothers' wombs creation after creation in threefold shadows.” (39:6)

In the *Surat al Baqarah*, it is stated:

“How do you disbelieve in God, seeing you were dead and He gave you life, then He shall make you dead, then He shall give you life, then unto Him you shall be returned.” (2:28)

In the *Surat al Hajj*, it states:

“It is He Who gave you life, then He shall make you dead, then He shall give you life.” (22:66)

There are many verses on this theme and all of them consider the present current order as the system of creation. The splitting of the grain and the seed under the ground, the growth of plants and herbs, the greening of the trees in spring-time – all of these are mentioned as part of the ever-new and perpetual Divine creativity.

In no place does the Qur'an consider the role of Divine creativity and will in the creation of life as relating exclusively to the first man or the first living creature that emerged upon the earth's surface, or consider only that organism or grain as the creature of God and the product of the Divine will.

The Noble Qur'an also mentions the creation of Adam, but not for the purpose of affirming monotheism (*tawhid*), or for the sake of the argument that since Adam was the first man, that proves that creation did occur and that 'God's hand emerged from its sleeve' to create human life. God's hand has never been concealed within a sleeve.

There is a strange point worthy of notice in this regard. The Qur'an makes use of the story of Adam to convey many teachings of a moral and educative character, such as: man's capacity for attaining to the station of God's vicegerency; his abundant capacity for knowledge; the angels' humility in front of knowledge; man's capacity for attaining superiority over the angels; the harm of greed, the harms of pride, the effects of sin in causing man's decline from the most sublime of stations; the role of penitence in man's salvation and his return to the station of proximity to God; warnings against the danger of misleading satanic insinuations, and the like.

But it never relates the special and exceptional situation of Adam in his creation to the subject of *tawhid* and theology, for the objective behind its mention of Adam's story was a moral and educative one. It was not intended as an evidence in favour of *tawhid*. Moreover, it confines itself to mentioning Adam, and says nothing about how the life of the other animal species originated on the earth.

We have mentioned earlier the customary approach of the theists who when confronted with the absence of an explanation for the beginning of life in the first living creature say, “It was the Divine breath which brought it into existence.” But the Qur'an considers the life of other human beings also to be the result of the Divine breath, in the same way as it considers the life of Adam as being due to the Divine breath.

In one place the Qur'an relates God as saying to angels regarding Adam:

“(And when thy Lord said to the angels ‘See, I am creating a mortal of clay of mud moulded.) When I have shaped him, and breathed My spirit in him, fall you down, bowing before him!’”
(16:28–29)

In another place it says:

“We created you, then We shaped you, then We said to the angel&– Bow yourselves to Adam.”
(7:11)

It is clear that, in this verse, creation, the blowing of the Divine breath and the veneration of angels is ascribed to all human beings in general. The Qur'an states in the *Sura Alif lam sajdah*:

“...Who has created all things well and He originated the creation of man out of clay, then He fashioned his progeny of an extraction of mean water, then He shaped it, and breathed His spirit in it. And He appointed for you hearing and sight, and heart; little thanks you show.” (32:7–9)

As pointed out by the exegetes and as indicated by the context itself, the pronoun in *sawwahu* (he shaped it) relates to *sulalah* (progeny), not to *al-‘insan* (man).

The Origin Life and The Divine Will

Here it is essential to discover the reason why ordinarily the theists refer to the origin and beginnings of life when relating life to the Divine will, and to discover as well the reason why the Noble Qur'an has never taken this path in its effort to affirm monotheism, considering as it does life and biological developments absolutely the direct result of God's will, without making any distinction whatsoever between the beginning of life and its continuation.

The truth is that this difference arises from a more fundamental difference between the logic of the Qur'an and all other approaches. It lies in this that a group of theists ordinarily see God from the negative, not the positive, aspect of their knowledge. That is, when faced with a failure to overcome something unknown, they bring in God.

They always seek God amid the mass of things unknown to them. That is, they always go after things whose natural causes are unknown to them. When in a certain case they encounter something whose natural cause is unknown to them, they immediately proclaim: “This was brought into existence by God's will.”

Inevitably, the more the number of things whose natural causes are unknown to them, the more their evidence of God's existence, and the more the number of things known and explained, the lesser evidence they seem to have for God's existence. For a group of theologians and adherents of

monotheism, the supranatural realm is a storehouse of their unknowns. Whenever they fail to understand and know something and to discover its natural cause, they immediately relate it to the supranatural.

They see the role of the supranatural as lying in, what appears to them as, exceptions to the natural order and violations of the course of nature. When they do not find a natural cause in a certain case, they substitute it with a supernatural one, unmindful of the fact that, firstly, the supranatural realm has its own order and law; secondly, they forget that if a cause takes the place of a material and natural cause, the substitute cause must itself be a material and natural cause on a par with matter and nature.

It does not remain a supranatural cause. The natural and supranatural exist on separate planes and not the same plane. Neither a natural cause can take the place of a supranatural cause, nor a supranatural cause the place of a natural cause.

The Holy Qur'an never relies for the evidence of the existence of the One God on cases where the system of natural law and order appears to have been violated. It relies in this regard on cases whose preliminaries and natural causes are known to the people, and it cites this order itself as a testimony to God's existence.

In the case of life, the logic of the Qur'an rests on the view that life is absolutely an emanation (*fayd*) higher and above the horizon of the physical and the sensible. Whatever the character of the laws involved in it, its source lies on a plane higher than that of sensible matter. Hence, the developments of life are the developments of creation. From the viewpoint of this logic, it makes no difference whether life was created instantaneously, in a single moment, or in the form of a gradual evolution, with one creation following another.

This logic rests on the principles that sensible matter is essentially devoid of life and that life is a light and emanation that must come from a higher source. Hence the laws of life, whatever form they may have, are the same as the laws of creation.

The difference between the existential degrees and planes of matter and life is a scientific and proved principle. Should we want to discover the supranatural source of life through the difference of existential planes between matter and life, it has to be on the basis of the positive aspects of our knowledge, not its negative aspects.

Thereby we would be searching for God in what is known to us, not in what is unknown to us. Then we would not be compelled to bring down the supranatural from its plane as a substitute for a natural cause that we may fail to discover. Rather, we would assume that a natural cause is definitely involved though the frontiers of scientific knowledge have not yet reached it.

Sadr al-Muta'allihin (Mulla Sadra), in the part of his book *al-'Asfar* concerning the soul, severely attacks Fakhr al-Din al-Razi precisely for this reason. He says: "I am amazed at this man and the likes of him

who, whenever they want to prove the doctrine of *tawhid* or some other religious doctrine, look for instances where the natural cause involved has not been recognized and where according to their belief the order of the world has been violated and laws have been broken.”¹

Conclusion

From the body of verses cited above it can be inferred that creation is not an instantaneous process from the viewpoint of the Noble Qur'an.

An animal or human being passes through various evolutionary stages and is always in the process of creation. Rather, basically, the world is always in the process of creation and in the state of perpetual coming into being.

There is an opposite viewpoint which considers creation to be something instantaneous. Whenever its proponents want to discuss the world's creation, they go after 'the first moment' when the world was created and brought out from the cover of nothingness.

They imagine that if they were not to make such an assumption, the world could no longer be regarded as a creation and as something that came into being. Similarly, whenever they want to discuss life as a Divine creation, they go after 'the first moment' when life began.

This kind of thinking is peculiarly a Jewish one:

“The Jews have said: 'God's hand is fettered'. Fettered are their hands, and they are cursed for what they have said.” (5:64)

That mode of thinking about the relation of life to the Divine will that always goes back to the beginning of life in order to relate it to God's will is the offspring of this Jewish outlook. This Jewish outlook gradually became prevalent and has spread everywhere. Regrettably, Islamic theologians too come under its influence. However, as pointed out, the idea of a 'first moment' is foreign to the teachings of the Noble Qur'an.

As indicated earlier, a problem that is discussed in our times is whether man would ever be capable of making a living organism. Would he, for instance, be able to make an artificial human spermatozoon which when deposited in the womb or some other suitable environment be able to develop into a complete human being?

We said that a group of theists, whose mode of thinking concerning the relation of life to the Divine will always turns to cases of exception and the first beginnings of life, emphatically negates such a possibility. But on the basis of the teachings that we have received from the Qur'an, we may say, there is nothing that stands in the way of such a possibility. This matter needs elaboration and must be examined from two aspects.

Firstly, we must examine the amount of structural complexity of a living organism to see whether or not some day man would be able to discover all the secrets that go into the material composition of the parts of a cell and the natural law responsible for the emergence of a living cell. We cannot say anything from this aspect, for the issue lies outside the scope of our competence. This is what the experts in the field have said: "That which is more significant and higher than the creation of the earth, the planets of the solar system and the whole universe is the substance of the protoplasm."

Secondly, if man one day succeeds in discovering the law of creation of living organisms, in the same way as he has discovered the laws relating to other creatures, and discovers all the conditions and material constituents of living organisms, and succeeds in preparing substances exactly like those of living organisms, will that artificial being possess life?

The answer is that it will definitely possess life, for it is impossible that the conditions for the existence of an emanation should exist completely without the realization of that emanation. Isn't it the case that the One, Self-Sufficient and absolutely perfect Divine Essence is the absolute source of all emanations? Isn't the Necessary Being-by Essence, necessary in all aspects and ways?

Here the doubt may possibly arise in some minds that if such be the case, what will become of the principle that life is exclusively in the hands of God and that others have no role in the giving and taking away of life? We said earlier that this is something acknowledged by the Noble Qur'an, and the answer to this question becomes clear after a review of what has been said. Should man attain such a capacity one day, all that he would have done is to be able to prepare the conditions of life, not the ability to create life. Man cannot give life, but he can complete the capacity of matter for receiving life. In other words, man is the agent of motion (*fa'il-e harakat*) not the source of being.

Should man succeed in doing such a thing, surely he would have made an important achievement from the viewpoint of scientific discovery. But from the viewpoint of a role in creation. of life his role would be the same as that of the parents in reproduction and procreation of offspring or of the peasant in creating life in wheat grains.

In none of these cases is man the creator of life. All that he accomplishes is to prepare the conditions of a substance for receiving life. The Noble Qur'an has described this matter in the best possible manner in the blessed *Surat al-Waqi'ah*:

"Have you considered the' soil that you till? Do you yourselves make the plants grow or are We the one who makes them grow?" (56:63-64)

"Have you considered the seed that you spill? Do you – yourselves create it, or are We the creators?" (56:58-59)

As to the miracles performed by the prophets, their miraculous character lies in that man is incapable of performing such acts with his ordinary knowledge and power. The prophets too had not attained that

knowledge and capacity through the ordinary means. An extraordinary power and knowledge that accompanied them had raised them over the plane of physical nature, which made it possible for them to become a source of such a prodigious performance.

Should man one day succeed in this achievement (i.e. 'artificial' creation of life), it would not mean that he has succeeded in doing something which the prophets did with the leave of God. The prophets used to give life and take it away with the leave of God. But if ordinary human beings some day attain such a capacity, that would be the capacity to prepare the conditions for life, in the same way as today they are capable of causing death by destroying the conditions of life, without possessing the capacity to take away life.

The giving and taking of life will remain in God's hands even if man, through the discovery of the laws of emanation and withdrawal of life, prepares or destroys the capacities of a substance for possessing life.

We said that man cannot create life and that creation of life lies outside the scope of his capacities. The giving and withdrawal of life is in God's hands, although man can prepare the conditions necessary for life to exist.

This must not lead us to conclude that there is some kind of division of work: that there are some activities that pertain to man without pertaining to God and that there are other activities that pertain to God without pertaining to man. Our sole objective is delimitation of the scope of man's activity, not delimitation of God's acts. That which characterizes the Divine aspect is absolute freedom (*itlaq*) and absence of limits; the limits and bounds are from the side of the creature. This matter needs an elaborate treatment and I request the reader to refer to the fifth volume of *Usul-e falsafeh wa rawish-e riyalism*.

¹. See *Usul-e falsafeh wa rawish-e riyalism*, III, 220.

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